

AN ALICE IN WONDERLAND SPOOF



ALEX IN Havemland

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Chapter One

If you'd like to see a map of All-the-Land, you can find it in my Facebook group (Search for Logan Jacobs in Facebook Groups), or on my Patreon (search Google for Patreon + Logan Jacobs).

Strange visions of smiling cats flashed before my mind's eye, but they disappeared into a swirling multi-colored vortex, and I surrendered to the floating sensation overpowering my body. I floated without direction through time and space, but those concepts were meaningless at the same time.

At long last, or maybe after no time at all, I came to a stop.

The world continued to move around me, but I'd lost touch with my body long ago, or maybe a few moments prior. Numbness prevailed, and I lost myself in the blissful lack of existence. A line of percussion instruments paraded through my skull, and the numbness faded into tingles throughout all my extremities. My mouth was dry enough to resemble a desert landscape, and I swallowed hard in an effort to produce more saliva.

I didn't know how long I laid there like that, but after a while I slowly came back to reality. Then I blinked into the bright light of day as the intense pounding in my ears slowly subsided, and vibrant reds, purples,

greens, yellows, oranges, and blues met my gaze as I peered up at the sky. It was a veritable rainbow of colors, and I stared in awe for a long moment while bird songs and bug noises echoed in the background.

Everything was singing, but they were all sorts of different songs, so it was hard to pick one out of the bunch. In between the songs were calls to “be quiet” and “wait your turn,” but I wasn’t sure who was speaking. I didn’t see any people anywhere within my vantage point.

Where was I?

The grass was soft beneath me, but it was damp with the early morning dew, and I wiggled my fingers into the blades as a feeling of euphoria floated up from my gut. A giggle rose from my throat unbidden, and I glanced around to see if anyone heard me.

In the distance, I saw smiling trees, but closer to me there were laughing flowers of all kinds. Mostly daffodils, daisies, and irises, and then I spotted a stern caterpillar who munched on a leaf as it glared up at me.

Except for the royal-blue caterpillar, the others didn’t seem to mind my laughter or my presence in their space. Wherever I was, it was somewhere I’d never been to before, of that I was certain. I wasn’t certain of many other things, and a few of them crossed my mind.

Who was I? And where did that cat go?

I blinked again as I tried to focus. There had been a cat, I was sure of it, but then again I wasn't certain of much. Once my fingers began to work again, I patted down my body only to find normal gray slacks, a blue button-up shirt, and shaggy black hair. Then I realized I'd worn those clothes to work, and suddenly images flashed before my mind's eye.

I saw my boss from when he'd called me into his office the day before, and he'd sat me down across from him to insist I take my vacation hours. I could just barely make out the lights of Coors Field out the window in the distance, and I'd focused on the view until my boss was done talking. I'd tried to argue the point for a while, but then I'd surrendered to letting him lecture me about making my job my entire life.

It basically was, but I wasn't going to argue with my boss.

I'd just moved to the city after I'd transferred to a new office, so I didn't know any of the people I worked with. I hadn't met any new friends in the city, either, so my life pretty much revolved around work twenty-four-seven.

I sighed as I closed my eyes, and the vision of my boss' office faded away. Some tidbits of my life were slowly coming back to me. I was Alex Wilson. I was twenty-six, and I worked as an office assistant in a tech support department. It was a boring job, monotonous and dull, but it made me enough money to get by comfortably.

But I still didn't understand how I'd ended up in a field of laughing flowers.

Was I dreaming?

I rolled my head to the side and blinked a few times to make sure I was seeing clearly, but sure enough, the cackling flowers leaned toward me as though thoroughly entertained by my confusion.

"What are you laughing at?" I asked without expecting a reply.

"You!" a string of daffodils giggled in unison.

"What... the... fuck?" I gasped.

I peered closer to find the little yellow flowers sported tiny faces in the center of their petals, and their lips were all stretched into wide smiles. The irises had a more mature look, and they blew me kisses every time I glanced their way, which made me think of my grandmother, but the daffodils and daisies looked more like children.

I must have lost my mind somewhere along the way, and I had the sudden urge to wake up from this dream.

I pinched my arm and slapped my cheeks lightly in an effort to rouse myself from whatever weird dream I was having, but nothing happened. I glanced over and noticed the blue caterpillar staring at me.

"What are you looking at?" I asked in a less than friendly tone.

The caterpillar continued to glare at me, but he didn't comment. The bright royal-blue bug sat under an iris with a leaf clutched in his first two hands, and to my surprise it looked like he was wearing little gloves. His eyebrows were drawn into a strict line above his small, round eyes as we stared at one another, but he never ceased his munching.

I had to be tripping balls or something because this was getting weirder by the minute.

I pushed myself up to a standing position and looked around. Flowers filled every inch of the field, but the trees created a circle around the perimeter of the clearing. Shadows lurked beneath the branches, and a chilly breeze swept toward me. It was equal parts euphoric and ominous. I spun in a slow circle, and I looked around for a sign of where I was.

Or when I was.

It had to be early in the morning, but I couldn't see the sun's position clearly through the rainbow-colored sky.

Rainbow. Not blue. Rainbow.

"I'm stoned or something," I said to myself, even though I couldn't really remember what I'd taken before bed.

Hell, I only really smoked pot occasionally at parties, and since I didn't know anyone in the city yet, I hadn't gone to any.

The air tasted sweet and refreshing, and I inhaled it greedily like I was devouring a four-course meal. My stomach growled in response. It must have been a while since I'd eaten, and I tried to think of the last meal I'd enjoyed.

I'd watched a nature documentary where people ate flowers for certain medicinal properties, but I didn't think the giggling group of blossoms would appreciate being my breakfast, so I went off in search of something to eat.

I decided to look around my trippy dream for a bacon tree, and since they were already in a good mood, I made my way over to the smiling forest.

"Anyone know where I can find a bacon tree?" I asked.

The trees did not respond.

I shook my head in disbelief. Of course, they hadn't talked to me, they were trees. Even if this was a dream, there had to be a limit to the level of ridiculousness.

Right?

The flowers had talked, though, so I walked around the field asking the same question of each group of blossoms.

“Have you seen a bacon tree?” I asked like I was in some sort of twisted nursery rhyme.

The flowers cackled at me, but they didn’t seem inclined to help me find my way to some breakfast, so I went back to where I’d originally woken up. The daffodils were still there rooted in the soil, and I sat down crossed-legged in front of them.

“Hello,” I said this time, and I felt my wits had returned a little. “How are you?”

“He’s talking to you!” A daffodil tossed back its petals and let out deep belly laughs.

“No, you!” a different daffodil cackled.

“He has to be talking to one of us!” a third giggled.

“Anyone, really,” I said. “I just need a little help.”

This caused another round of uproarious giggles, and I almost gave up on talking to the flowers altogether. It wasn’t very helpful to just laugh at someone in need of assistance, and I decided they were quite rude despite being in a good mood. Maybe I could talk the stern caterpillar into giving me some directions.

“Help! Please!” A scream suddenly pierced the air, followed by a deep, throaty growl, and shivers ran up my spine. “Someone, help me!”

My head whipped around to face the sound of the scream, and goosebumps erupted down my arms.

What the fuck was that?

I didn't have time to figure out where I was or where I was going. Someone needed help, and it sounded like a woman, so I took off running through the field of laughing flowers without another thought, and I headed in the direction of the sound. I wasn't particularly a strong fighter, but I was no coward, so I pressed past the trees and jumped over roots reaching up to trip me.

The smiling trees shifted to face me as I ran by them, but I ignored the taunting grins as I ran at breakneck speed through the forest. They could smile all they wanted, nothing was going to stop me from helping the woman who'd screamed.

I heard scuffling through the undergrowth up ahead, and I burst through the tree line into another clearing to see the most ridiculous and absurd scene I'd ever witnessed before in my life.

What I could only describe as a cat-girl hissed and scratched at a large dog-like creature with fangs hanging from its gaping maw and dark spots covering its humped back. The two tumbled and rolled around the clearing like two pets arguing over a treat, but the things in the field before

me were several times larger than domesticated cats and dogs. The dog thing snarled and raised its hackles, but the growl turned to a yowl of pain as the cat-girl got a good scratch in, and the two jumped back away from each other.

I stood there in shock as the two began to circle, and I got a better look at the person I assumed had screamed for help. I blinked several times to confirm what my eyes were telling me, but the scene before me never changed.

This had to be a dream. There was no way something as bizarre as what I was seeing could be reality.

Purple-blue ears stuck out from the cat-girl's jagged black hair, and she wore a white tunic cinched at the waist with a leather belt. There was a hole in the back of her skirt where a fluffy purple-and-blue-striped tail jutted out, and my eyes widened as I took in the long claws protruding from her fingertips. Her big eyes were a deep purple, and her gaze flicked from the beast's injured snout to its feet with a nervous energy.

Streaks of blood speckled the dog-beast's snout, and its yellow eyes were filled with rage. The creature growled, low and menacing, and the cat-girl almost jumped out of her skin. Then the girl started to fumble with a pouch strapped to her side as the dog-creature pawed its feet in the dirt like it was about to charge.

What was she doing?

I shook my head to rid myself of the hazy feeling surrounding my brain, and then I patted down my person in search of something to use as a weapon, but my roaming fingers only found my wallet. I didn't think I could bribe the dog monster, so I dismissed my only asset. I was unarmed, and I wasn't sure what I would be capable of, but I had to do something, so I turned to search the nearby trees for a stick.

“Ah-ha!” the cat-girl cheered, and I turned back around to see her pull a tiny bottle from her hip pouch, stomp her feet, and pumped her arms as she spun around in a circle, but then she came face to face with me, and she gasped. Her deep-purple eyes widened, and her jaw fell open, which revealed her own set of gleaming fangs.

The dog-monster chose that moment to attack, and he charged toward the cat-girl with a rumbling bark-like noise. She hissed and jumped out of the way, but she dropped her bottle in the process. Then the cat-girl dashed across the clearing to the shelter of the trees, but her eyes shot over her shoulder to the bottle laying among the strands of grass.

That was when the beast spotted me, and its hackles shivered as another baritone growl built in its throat. The dog-monster was torn between coming after me or continuing after the cat-girl, and its yellow eyes flicked back and forth between us as a snarl rose in its throat.

Then it turned toward me ever so slightly, and its muscles began to bunch like it was about to pounce. My heart hammered out a staccato beat against my rib cage, and I pictured myself being ripped to shreds by the long fangs dangling from the beast's mouth.

Wait, this was just a dream, right?

I could do whatever the fuck I wanted to without consequences, and my fear of the big scary dog-monster dissipated. I marched toward the overgrown mutt, pulled back my foot, and kicked it square in the mouth, but the impact reverberated through my shin up to my hip, and I nearly fell over from the pain.

“Oh, shit!” I gasped out as I regained my balance.

The dog-monster snarled as its head snapped back toward me, and I watched a string of yellow saliva drip from its gaping maw before I noticed its arm muscles bunch again.

Uhhhhh... maybe this wasn't a dream.

“Fuck,” I gasped as I turned and dashed for the tree line, and I heard the loud thud of the beast's paws in the dirt as it chased after me. The ground shook beneath my feet, and I stumbled a little, but I managed to keep my footing as I dove for cover behind a tree.

The dog-monster barreled after me with murderous intent, and it got so close, I could smell the rank musk radiating from its fur. I held my breath as I inched my way around the tree, and I made sure to keep the width of the bark between me and the massive canine-like creature. It was too large to easily maneuver through the trunks of the smiling trees, so at least I had that going for me.

“The potion!” the cat-girl called out. “Bring it to me!”

I glanced across the clearing to where the bottle laid in the field of laughing flowers, and I grimaced. The dog-monster could easily outrun me with that much space to spread out, so doing what she asked sounded like certain death.

The bottle was closer to me than to her, though, and her purple eyes remained locked on the container as if it were the answer to all of our problems.

Maybe it was, so I made a mad dash out into the open.

The dog-monster snarled as he swiftly swiveled to redirect his trajectory, and an instant later, he was hot on my tail again.

“Oooh, shit!” I pumped my arms as I approached the bottle in the grass, and then with one final burst of speed, I dove toward it.

The beast moved toward me at the same time, and I narrowly avoided an encounter with its reaching claws as I rolled through the laughing flowers. I wrapped my fist around the tiny bottle, but I didn't have time to process my victory.

I managed to keep a tight grip on the potion as I came to my feet at a dead run, but then I aimed for the safety of the trees with the bottle clutched securely in my fist. I could hear the dog-monster turning around to chase me down, and my pace quickened even more. My work shoes weren't ideal for running through a field of laughing flowers, but I was more than motivated to get across the clearing in one piece. My lungs burned from the exertion, and I was covered from head to toe in sweat, but this nightmare was far from over. I slowed down slightly once I hit the shelter of the branches with the dog-monster still charging across the field of flowers behind me, and I quickly looked around for the cat-girl, but I couldn't see her anywhere.

Where did she go?

My ears rang as I gasped for breath, but the dog-monster was almost to the tree line, so I didn't have a lot of time to search. The beast came crashing through the underbrush with fangs gleaming an instant later, and I inhaled sharply before I started to run in the other direction.

“Aaaah!” The cat-girl suddenly catapulted herself out of a tree above my head, and she landed on the dog-monster’s face.

“What the fuck!” I gasped as I jumped away from the collision.

The two rolled across the ground in a pile of hissing, scratching claws, but the cat-girl seemed to be holding her own. Still, I couldn’t exactly hand her the potion bottle while she was locked in a fight with a monster several times her size.

I looked down at the glass container clutched in my hand, and I realized it was filled with a glittering green mixture. There was a label on the other side, and I rolled it over to reveal the lettering.

It simply said “big” in large, bold letters.

This was some Alice in Wonderland type of shit, and I swallowed hard as the implications raced through my mind. I had no idea what was going to actually happen if I drank this mysterious potion, but the way the cat-girl had acted about it made me think it would solve all our problems.

My heartbeat resembled a drumline in my chest, but then the cat-girl’s yowl of pain brought me out of my deliberation.

I pulled the cork free from the top, and I inhaled the fumes escaping the bottle. It didn’t smell bad at all, but it held an earthy aroma like the way the ground smelled after it rained. I squeezed my nose between my fingers,

put the rim to my lips, and tilted my head back to allow the sparkling green liquid to slide into my mouth.

The taste was sharp and tangy, but I swallowed the mouthful of sparkling potion, and I looked up just in time to see the dog-monster barreling toward me through the underbrush. The cat-girl was nowhere to be seen now, but I couldn't worry about that. Even the trees weren't safe from whatever the fuck this beast was, so I turned around and ran in the opposite direction as fast as I could.

I ran and ran as fast as I could, but I could hear the dog-monster close behind me. I felt the heat of his breath on my lower back a couple of times, but it merely served to increase my motivation to get the fuck away from it. It could take my head off in one bite if it felt so inclined, and I wasn't about to give it any more opportunities than it already had.

My body started to feel weird, but I didn't have time to inspect myself for injuries. Stopping meant certain death, and I was sure I'd gotten countless scratches from the bushes and vines I'd run through, so I just shoved the discomfort to the back of my mind. I didn't spare a look behind me to check on the progress of the dog-monster, but I could hear its panting breaths and feel the heat radiating from its snarling maw.

A moment later, the trees started to get shorter and shorter as I ran until suddenly I was stumbling over knee high bushes with nothing

overhead. The change happened so fast I hadn't noticed the landscape shrinking. A weird stretching sensation swept through my body, and I looked around at the shifting scenery. Snapping sounds filled my ears, but it had to be the dog-monster crashing through the underbrush behind me. The rainbow-colored sky stretched above me in all directions like a tie-dye tapestry, but when I looked down, the dog-monster was nowhere to be seen. Down seemed to be really far away, and I thought about this concept briefly.

Did up and down mean less in this place?

Where exactly was I?

A panicky feeling filled my gut, but then something pinched my toe, and I winced as I peered down at my feet. There was a miniature version of the dog-monster attacking my pinky toe. It snapped and barked in a high-pitched voice as it danced back and forth, and then it latched onto my foot once more. It was more annoying than painful, like the tiny rebellion of an angry thumb-sized chihuahua.

What happened to my shoes?

Had the creature spawned a smaller version of itself?

And where was the cat-girl?

My thoughts were running in circles, and the woozy feeling had returned. The air was thinner, and I struggled to inhale enough gulps of oxygen. I swatted the small dog-monster away from my bare feet, and then my gaze swept over my ruined clothes. My pants were stretched over enormous legs, and they resembled shorts more so than slacks. My shirt was unbuttoned and pulled taut across my shoulders, and the sleeves didn't even reach my elbows.

I'd gotten big.

I was not feeling entirely myself, and besides, I was probably dreaming.

The dog-monster hadn't spawned a smaller version of itself, and the trees hadn't gotten shorter. Once I realized what was going on, I bent over to scoop the now-small dog-monster up into my massive hands. It would be simple enough to kill it once and for all, and then I could find the cat-girl.

Then I caught a look around at the landscape in my peripheral vision, and my breath halted in my throat.

The sky stretched endlessly, and so did the trees. There were no buildings as far as the eye could see, but I could hear the rushing sound of water and the trill of birdsong. In the distance, mountains carved into the rainbow sky, and I watched colorful beasts flying toward the sunrise. The

air smelled like cotton candy ice cream, and the vibrant hues of the plant life created a masterpiece greater than any art I'd seen in a gallery.

I definitely wasn't in Denver anymore.

But, was this all just a dream?

What if I never returned to my normal size?

A shudder went through me at the thought, but I shook my head to dispel it, and I clenched my fist tightly around the snarling, barking creature. It clawed at the palm of my hand in a desperate effort to escape, but then it latched its fangs onto my flesh, and I hissed with pain.

My hand opened instinctively, which caused me to drop my prisoner, and the dog-monster plummeted to the ground, but I didn't bother trying to catch it since it had been about to kill the cat-girl I'd come to save. It fell through the air with a high-pitched whine, and then it crashed through the canopy of the trees to splatter against the ground below. The dog-monster didn't move, and I poked it with my toe a couple of times to make sure it was dead. Then I let out a sigh of relief.

I'd defeated the dog-monster once and for all.

Now, I needed some answers from the mysterious cat-girl.

Chapter Two

I searched the ground, and the dog-monster was the only thing I could find, but its body had made a dent in the dirt like an asteroid hitting earth. Debris was scattered everywhere, and giant rocks were dislodged all around the monster's body. I examined it a little more closely, and I ignored the sharp smell of death surrounding it as I rolled it over with my branch-sized finger.

Black spots covered the creature's gray fur, and its shoulders were massive. It was like the entire torso of a pro wrestler attached to either side of its thick neck. Its hind legs were shorter and thinner, and it was amazing it could run as fast as it had. The tail looked like it belonged to a reptile of some kind, and the scales merged with the fur to create a beast of nightmarish quality.

I had to give it to myself, if this was a dream, then I was more imaginative than I thought.

There wasn't anything else except for broken branches and chunks of dirt in a wide radius around the dog-monster's body. I was about to give up hope that I would ever find the mysterious cat-girl I'd come to rescue, and I sighed as I pushed myself back up to my full height.

Then I spotted the striped blue-and-purple tail of the cat-girl in my peripheral vision, and I abandoned the dog-monster without another thought. I pulled aside a tree to find her knocked unconscious on the ground. I didn't know what had happened to her, but I could see the rise and fall of her chest as I hunched over her still form.

"Hey, can you hear me?" I whispered, but my voice was still loud enough to stir some strange-looking birds out of the nearby trees.

The cat-girl did not move, didn't even flinch, but at least she was alive.

I scooped her small body up into my hands, and I cradled her against my chest with one arm as I looked around. While I'd handled the problem of the dog-monster, I wanted to put some distance between us and its corpse. There was no telling what else would come after us, or if the dog-monster was alone. This area wasn't safe.

I looked to the sun where it was just beginning to rise over the horizon, and I figured it was as good a direction as any, so I made my way toward it through the knee-high trees with the cat-girl in my arms. The rainbow sky stretched over my head in all directions, and the thin sweet air felt good in my lungs, but I wasn't sure how long it was going to last. I glanced over my shoulder at the fields of laughing flowers I left behind, but I didn't see any other pathways to take, so I continued forward.

“This is fucking awesome,” I said in a loud, booming voice as I scanned over the landscape, and birds took off in flight from the nearby trees at the sound. I could see for miles in every direction, and my slowest walk was probably as fast as a car. I craned my head around trying to see all of it at once, but everywhere I looked appeared just as magical.

This was one hell of a dream, but I really wanted to wake up now.

I walked for a while longer, and a mountain began to draw steadily closer with each step I took, so I changed course and decided to aim for the foothills of the snow-capped peak. The wind rustled through the canopies of the trees at my knees, and I shivered in the cooler air. I was making good time, but then I felt my bones begin to shrink, and a sharp pulling sensation twisted through my entire body.

I quickly laid the unconscious cat-girl down on the ground before I dropped her, and a few moments later, I stood beneath the canopy of the trees as my normal size. My head swam from the sudden shrinkage, and my legs were covered in scratches from the knee down, but other than that I was uninjured.

I looked up at the tiny fragments of rainbow sky I could see through the foliage, and then I looked down at the cat-girl at my feet. Her chest still rose and fell evenly, and I sighed with relief. I didn’t know why she was unconscious, but I knew I’d do anything to keep her alive.

Whoever she was.

I looked around at my new landscape, and I shivered in the ragged remains of my clothes. The air was cooler closer to the mountains, and I envied the cat-girl's random spots of fur keeping her warm, but that was a pointless exercise. I needed to make a fire, not only for warmth, but also protection. There was no telling what else lurked in these weird woods.

"Alright, Alex, time to man up." I clenched my fists at my side as I summoned all the willpower I had in me. "It doesn't matter what else is out there, I'll keep her safe. Whoever she is..."

The trees weren't smiling here, which was a relief, and I didn't see a laughing flower anywhere. I really didn't enjoy the guilt I felt when I'd accidentally plucked the flower, but I couldn't imagine taking wood from a tree with a face and then burning it in front of them.

Better off this way, with the trees silent and unobservant. If the trees could smile, then there was no telling what else they were capable of. I didn't know if the smiling trees were sentient or not, but their demeanors were simply unnerving in any case.

Time to make a fire.

I'd been in boy scouts as a kid, so I was familiar with the basic fire-starting techniques, but those memories were far away in my childhood.

Still, I knew what to do, so I began to gather dead wood dropped on the ground, and I put it all in a pile in the middle of three large trees.

Then I moved the cat-girl into a semi sitting-up position against one of the tree's trunks, and it made me feel less alone to have her nearby, even if she was unconscious. She sighed in her sleep, and the sound made me smile.

The cat-girl was even more beautiful up close, and I stared at her sleeping, serene face for a long moment. She had impossibly long eyelashes over her abnormally large eyes, wide lips, and an adorable cherub chin. Her ears appeared to be soft and fuzzy, with long strands blooming from the very tip of the triangle shape, but her tail was poufy and striped like a racoon's.

That was where the cat resemblance ended, though, and the rest of her body was entirely human. My gaze swept down her person to take in all of her with an appreciative eye. Her breasts pressed against the fabric of her tunic, and the belt at her waist was cinched tightly to reveal the generous curves of her hips. Her legs were toned, muscular, and covered in fishnet stockings. Fur protruded from around her ankles, and her bare feet had high arches and the cutest toes I'd ever seen.

My eyes slowly rose from her feet back to her head, and my mouth watered the more I looked at her.

She had the face of a young woman, with an elfin, pink-tipped nose, and I found myself moving toward her instinctively. The desire to protect her at all costs flooded my being, and my heartbeats were rapid. I was even more determined to help her than when I'd first heard her scream, but then I pictured her waking up and finding me staring like an idiot, so I left her alone and returned to the task of gathering firewood.

“You don't want to scare her off, Alex,” I reminded myself in a stern voice.

Once I had enough wood to make a decent fire, I began to get leaves, plant fibers, and anything else dry enough to burn to use as tinder. Then I set about trying to get a spark to strike.

One method I did remember was rubbing two sticks together, so I set about finding the perfect sticks for the job. It took me a little while, and by the time I sat down in the dirt with all my fire making supplies, the sun was much higher in the rainbow-colored sky.

The light still barely penetrated the dense foliage of the canopy, though, and goosebumps decorated my exposed arms and legs. My clothes were in tatters, and my stomach growled defiantly, but I had no idea when my next meal would be.

Then a sudden spark of genius struck me. If this was a dream, then it was my dream, and I could imagine any food I wanted. If I concentrated hard enough, maybe I could make a four-course meal magically appear before me.

I placed my sticks on the ground and closed my eyes as I envisioned a grilled steak topped with caramelized onions, mashed potatoes drenched in savory gravy, and perfectly steamed broccoli. It was one of my favorite meals besides pizza, and my mouth watered at the mere thought of the juicy meat. Then I pictured a blanket spread across the ground covered in dishes, fruit, chocolates, and various drinks.

I carefully opened my eyes, and I glanced around at the makeshift campsite hungrily, but there was no food laid out picnic style anywhere to be seen. All I saw was the sleeping cat-girl and my pile of wood.

I supposed this wasn't that kind of dream.

I returned to the task of starting a fire with a shrug, but my thoughts began to wander as I attempted to rub the two sticks together. I hadn't been this hungry in a long time. I couldn't remember ever having hunger pains in dreams before, but I supposed there was a first time for everything.

When was the last time I'd eaten?

I suddenly remembered ordering pizza and wings from the sports bar down the street, and the image of the hot delivery babe arriving at my apartment flashed through my mind's eye. I'd only ever been inside the establishment where she worked one time because once I found out they delivered, I'd opted for the hermit route ever since, but that was mostly because of the super sexy delivery girl I'd gotten to know.

Anna had fire-red hair she pulled through the loop of her baseball cap, and the V-neck t-shirt stretched across her petite frame revealed her ample cleavage. A choker necklace usually cradled her throat, and the black silk contrasted her pale freckled skin nicely. Pair the ensemble with cutoff jean shorts and a set of high-top converse, and she was the living embodiment of a wet dream.

And, oh, man, did I want her.

Anna delivered every single pizza I'd ordered from the sports bar where she worked, and every single time, I'd invited her inside. I'd wanted her from the moment I'd met her, but I didn't seriously think I had any chance of getting with her. I wasn't expecting anything different during this attempt, but the words came out of my mouth anyway.

"I've once again ordered way too much food for one person," I'd chuckled. "Care to join me?"

“You know what?” Anna had giggled. “This is actually the last delivery of my shift, so I’d love to come in and have some. I’m starving.”

I’d fought to control my jaw as it lunged for the floor, and then I’d cleared my throat as I stepped away from the doorway to allow her in.

That was where the memory ended, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t remember past the moment of me shutting the door behind Anna.

I shook my head in amazement at my own luck as the memory faded away, and I returned my attention to the sticks I was rubbing together. The friction was causing a lot of heat to radiate from where the pieces of wood joined together, but there weren’t any other signs of fire.

I doubled down, and a concentrated frown creased my brow. I was glad the cat-girl was passed out and couldn’t witness my struggle. I had a feeling she could start a fire a lot faster than I could, but she was knocked unconscious, so not helpful.

After a while, a spark lit up the shadows beneath the trees, and I carefully blew it into a flame. It went out a moment later, and I resisted the urge to sigh in defeat. This cat-girl needed my help, and if all I could do was start a fire, then I was going to fucking do it.

“Come on, Alex, you got this,” I muttered to myself as I went about another attempt. “Keep going...”

This was the weirdest dream I'd ever had, but something was nagging at the back of my mind. I'd gotten scratched up by the trees when I was a giant, and the marks were beginning to sting. I'd have to clean them soon, or they could get infected.

That thought in and of itself was enough to make me start to question the dream aspect. I'd never been injured in dreams before, or at least never felt pain, so this was either hyper realistic or reality. but if this wasn't a dream, then I was in a lot more trouble than I previously thought. For starters, death seemed a much higher likelihood.

Another spark erupted, and I returned my focus to my fire making task. Just as I was blowing the flame to life, the cat-girl began to rouse. I used the small flame to light the tinder beneath the logs I'd stacked in a teepee shape, and I bent over to blow softly on the embers.

A moment later, my tiny flame had bloomed into a roaring fire, and I sat back on my heels as I dusted off my hands.

"You made that look easy," the cat-girl said in a soft voice. "Fire is a hungry creature."

"That's a strange thing to say," I chuckled a little nervously, and my heart skipped a beat as her beautiful violet eyes found mine. "I'm Alex, by the way."

“You’re not from here,” the cat-girl said as her purple-blue ears twitched atop her head. “I can tell. How did you get here? Where did you come from? How long are you staying?”

“I-I don’t know.” I shook my head. “Where is here?”

“You don’t know where you are?” The cat-girl tilted her head to the side, and a shit-eating grin spread across her face. “Do you know who you are?”

“I already told you.” I frowned. “I’m Alex.”

“What’s an Alex?” The cat-girl’s smile never faded. “Did you save me? Where are we? How far are the Happy Fields? Where’s my potion?”

“Whoa, hold on,” I laughed. “One question at a time, and I have a few of my own. I think it’s only fair that we take turns. What do you say?”

“I say a lot of things.” The cat-girl tilted her head to the other side. “Didn’t I see you in the field?”

“Yes, I heard you shout for help,” I explained.

“How did you get here?” the cat-girl asked again.

“If I knew that, then I’d know how to get back home.” I smirked.

“But it’s my turn to get an answer.”

“Alright.” The cat-girl’s smile widened to an impossible degree, and it looked like her grin might get away from her if she didn’t remain vigilant.

“What answers does an Alex seek?”

“I’m not an Alex, my name is Alex, I’m a boy, well, a man...” I raked a self-conscious hand through my shaggy black hair. “What I mean to say is, you can call me Alex, but I don’t know what to call you. What’s your name?”

“I thought it should be obvious.” The cat-girl moved onto all fours, and she crawled toward me while her tail swished behind her.

“I-It’s not.” Her movement stirred a reaction in my loins, and I swallowed hard as I regained my composure, but I managed to flash her a friendly smile. “Is it a secret or something?”

“Secrets come in all shapes and sizes, but names are not usually among them.” The cat-girl had to be fucking with me at this point, but I kept my cool.

“So, what are you called?” I pressed.

“Una.” The cat-girl sat back on her legs, and her tail flicked playfully.

“Why would that be obvious?” I asked.

“I thought you would know.” Una shrugged.

Man, this chick was weird. Hot as hell, but fucking weird.

“Well, in any case, it’s very nice to meet you, Miss Una.” I stuck out my hand for a shake.

“How can you miss me if I’m right here?” Una asked with another curious tilt of her head. “Do you miss not knowing what to call me?”

“No, never mind,” I chuckled, and I dropped my unshaken hand.

“Una,” Una insisted. “Not Never mind.”

“No, I just meant, oh forget it.” I waved a dismissive hand. “It’s your turn to ask a question.”

“Where are you from?” Una questioned immediately.

“Earth?” I asked in a hesitant tone.

“Ee-aare-thh,” Una pronounced slowly, and her ears flattened against her head as she scrunched up her nose. “What a strange name.”

“Yeah, so, um, where exactly are we?” I finally asked the question I’d been dying to know the answer to.

“Together.” Una shrugged, and a look of confusion filled her purple eyes. “It would be harder to talk if we were not.”

“Well, I know that.” I swallowed down the lump of frustration that rose in my throat at her mind-numbing way of speaking, and I took a deep, calming breath. It was like she was speaking in riddles, and my brain felt fried. “I meant, if this isn’t Earth, then where the hell am I?”

“The land where all the places are,” Una explained as her grin widened.

“Yes, but what do you call it?” I pressed.

“The land where all the places are?” Una tilted her head to the side. “All-the-land, of course.”

“I know that’s where all the places are, but what’s the name of all the land?” I rubbed a finger against my temple.

“All-the-land,” Una echoed.

“Yes.” I nodded at a mockingly slow pace. “What do you call it?”

“You are unfamiliar with All-the-land?” Una smiled. “But I swore you said you’d visited before.”

“I said no such thing,” I argued.

“No, you said you were an Alex,” Una countered. “I haven’t heard you say no such thing, unless you count saying it just now, which would be honest, but not forthright.”

“I’m being honest,” I said. “I have no reason to lie to you. This is my dream, after all.”

“This world is a dream?” Una’s eyes lit up with curiosity. “How do you know so much if you’ve never been here before?”

“We aren’t getting anywhere like this,” I sighed, and I raked a hand through my hair once more. “We need to slow down and take it one thing at a time.”

“Where do you want to go?” Una looked disappointed. “Are you returning to Earth? Why are you leaving? I thought we were getting along?”

“We are, you’re great,” I said, even though my brain felt like it was going to start leaking through my ears. “I just mean we need to ask each other questions one at a time so we don’t get confused.”

“Confusion is a normal sensation here,” Una informed me. “I would just give in to it.”

“How does one give in to confusion?” I shook my head.

“I believe you already have,” Una observed with a wry smirk. “I’ve never met an Alex before. What do you do?”

“What do I do? Well, I’m a...” I trailed off because I didn’t think there was any universe where the talking cat person would understand what an office assistant was, but then I thought of the best way to answer her. “I saved your life, didn’t I?”

“Did you?” Una’s curious head tilt was growing on me.

“What was that thing attacking you, anyway?” I asked.

“Did you kill it?” Una’s purple eyes lit up with excitement, and she whipped her head around in every direction as she sniffed the air. “Where is it?”

“Far away from here,” I said. “It’s dead as a doorknob.”

“I’ve had some lively conversations with doorknobs,” Una said in an offended tone. “Perhaps the Sniffer Snatcher is more alive than you assumed.”

“Sniffer Snatcher?” I asked.

“The beast who was chasing me.” Una nodded. “I had him almost bested when you showed up, and then I tripped over a tree root as I was trying to escape.”

“I wouldn’t describe what I saw as ‘almost bested,’ but tripping over a root sounds like a pretty clumsy mistake,” I pointed out. “Aren’t cats supposed to be graceful and agile?”

“I can tell you aren’t from around here,” Una snickered. “Otherwise, you would ask different questions. You obviously don’t know what happens when you drink an agility potion. I’m clumsier than a bag of rocks now.”

That sounded backward. How could an agility potion make someone clumsy?

Maybe I was in some sort of virtual reality where everything was upside down and backward?

This wasn't like any video game I'd ever played before, or any dream I'd ever had before, either, and I had no idea how to get back home.

"You're right, I don't understand." My stomach growled insistently, and I gave Una a bashful smile "Any chance you have some food in that little pouch of yours?"

"I have some bacon, but only a couple of slices," Una said, and she pulled out the strips of dried meat.

"You just keep bacon in your pocket?" I snickered.

"Of course!" Her grin got even larger, but I found it more sexy than creepy.

"Thank you." I accepted the meager meal with a grateful smile. "I suppose we will have to forage or hunt for something more to eat."

"There will be food at Havenwood," Una explained as she munched on her snack. "You will love it there. Not a single Sniffer Snatcher is allowed."

"What other things are out to kill us?" I asked as I glanced around at the trees.

“Oh, there’s lots of ways to die in All-the-land,” Una informed me in a cheerful tone. “You could have your pick, really.”

“I’d rather not,” I chuckled and decided to give in to her brand of madness. “Have you lived here, in All-the-land, your whole life?”

“Yes.” Una nodded, but then she fluttered her eyelashes at me. “I’m glad you’re here, Alex. You arrived just in time to save us all.”

“All?” I looked around at the small clearing, but we were alone still.

“I know you can do it.” Una nodded emphatically, but she didn’t elaborate on what she meant, and then she started to riffle through her hip pouch as though in search of something. “Oh, what happened to my potion?”

“The ‘Big’ potion?” I asked. “I drank it.”

“You did!” Una’s purple eyes grew to the size of saucers, and she shuffled forward to inspect me. “How do you feel? Are you okay? But you don’t look tiny or big?”

“It wore off,” I said with a shrug.

“I can tell it wore off, but you must have been huge before the potion...” Una walked around me in a circle, and she tapped a finger against her chin as her adorable tail flicked with curiosity.

“Just normal-sized.” I shrugged. “I turned into a giant after I drank your green juice, but after a while I shrank back to my usual proportions.”

“Impossible.” Una shook her head. “You’d be tiny. I saw you in the clearing before I got knocked out by that silly root. You’re the same size as you are now. The only way that could happen is if... No... There’s no way. So, you’re lying.”

Una’s eyes widened, and she scurried away from me until her back pressed up against the tree, but then she leapt to her feet and started to march away from the campsite.

“Wait, where are you going?” I hurried to follow after her since she was the only person I’d encountered in this dream, and I wasn’t about to let her go without getting the answers to my questions first. “I’m not lying, I swear!”

“Swearing is just as bad as lying,” Una said over her shoulder, and her tail swished with sass.

“I just meant... Well, I don’t know, but I’m not lying.” I finally caught up to her, and I grabbed her hand in mine to pull her to a stop.

“Please, Una, you’re the only other person I’ve met here, and I still have a bunch of questions I want to ask you.”

“If you’re not lying, then you need to come with me to Havenwood straight away,” she insisted, but she paused long enough to meet my gaze.

My eyes were earnest as I stared into her purple depths. “What’s Havenwood? What’s going on?”

“My friends.” Una lifted her chin slightly, and she held my gaze for a long moment. “Do you... Will you come with me?”

“Before I go anywhere with you, I need some answers, and you were about to say something before you accused me of lying,” I reminded her. “What was it?”

Una stared into my eyes for a long moment, and the fire’s light reflected in her purple depths. She seemed amazed by my very presence before her, but she was obviously locked in some internal debate. Her gaze flicked across my face as if she searched for the answers to all of life’s questions until her eyes returned to mine, and then awe filled her expression.

“Could it be?” Her voice came out as a tiny squeak, and emotion welled up in her eyes. “Could you truly be... The Dreamer?”

This was definitely the weirdest dream I’d ever had before.

But I was getting curiouser and curiouser.

Chapter Three

I had to be tripping balls or have completely lost my mind at some point, but there I was in the middle of a weird forest talking to a cat-girl named Una. She'd just called me the Dreamer, and while it was unsettling to consider the implications of such a title, I couldn't argue with its accuracy. Still, I didn't remember ever asking to be some special dreamer, and I decided it was time to wake up.

I slapped myself across the face in an effort to rouse myself, but nothing happened. I even pinched my arms in a couple of places, but when I opened my eyes, I still stood in the creepy forest.

Whatever dream this was, it was sticking.

"You have to be the one!" Una insisted. "Who else would you be? You're here to save All-the-land! The Dreamer of prophecy! You must be..."

I held up my hands to stop her, and I shook my head to dispel the sudden woozy feeling returning to my brain. It was all a little overwhelming. I must have gone completely insane, and this was what the last brain cells operating inside my skull had created.

I was crazy. This was crazy. Talking to a cat-girl was absolutely bonkers. There had to be a logical explanation.

“This is all just a dream, isn’t it?” I chuckled, but it came out more nervous than I wanted. “You’re a figment of my imagination.”

“I am not a figment.” Una stuck out her chin. “I am Una, and you are the Dreamer. There’s no other explanation. You are here to save all of All-the-land!”

“No other explanation for what, exactly?” I pressed.

“You’re not from here,” Una said as if this explained everything.

“And?” I asked.

“The Dreamer isn’t from All-the-land; he will be a stranger,” Una said with a decisive nod. “Very strange indeed. He won’t know how the things go up or down or side to side.”

Shivers ran up my spine, but I had to admit the words felt right.

Was this really a dream?

Was I the Dreamer the prophecy had foretold?

Or was I just tripping balls in my apartment?

If I was in a dream, then it was far more extensive and immersive than any I’d ever had before. I was beginning to suspect it was more than an illusion, but that merely raised more questions I didn’t have the answers to.

“Okay, we need to slow down,” I said, and I raked a hand through my hair as I calmed my racing thoughts. “Look... I made this fire. Can we just

sit down and talk for a while before you go running off into the forest?”

“I wasn’t running,” Una pointed out, and her ears twitched as she considered my proposition. “I was walking quickly, but yes, I will join you by your fire.”

“Good.” I gestured toward the flames. “After you.”

The beautiful cat-girl swiveled on her feet, but she stumbled a little, and I reached out to catch her.

“Thank you.” Her violet eyes met mine, and I was mesmerized by their sparkling depths.

“You sure are clumsy,” I chuckled. “It’s a bit odd for a cat.”

“Like I said, I wasn’t always like this.” Una waved a dismissive hand as she pushed herself out of my arms. Then she crossed the distance to the fire, and she plopped down into a cross-legged position while her striped tail flicked behind her.

“How come?” I followed behind her, and I made sure to leave some distance between us as I sat down. I didn’t want to make her uncomfortable, but I wanted to be as close to her as possible at the same time.

“I drank an agility potion.” Una shrugged, but then realization dawned on her face. “You don’t know how the potions work. You’re not from here.”

“You’re getting it,” I laughed. “So, tell me about these potions.”

“You saw for yourself,” Una said. “You drank my ‘big’ potion. Then you got bigger.”

“Yeah.” I furrowed my brow as I thought about what I’d learned from the experience. “I drank it, got really big, but after a while I shrank back to my normal size. It seems simple enough.”

“Except that is a strange reaction,” Una explained. “No side effects, no cravings, no withdrawal symptoms?”

“I was pretty hungry before you shared your bacon with me,” I pointed out. “But I would have been happy with anything.”

Una’s face brightened, and she searched her hip pouch for another slice of bacon, but she came up empty-handed.

“I’m sorry, that was all I had, but I know where more bacon grows,” Una informed me in a proud tone. “If you liked the stuff I gave you, just wait until you taste it fresh! It’s so much better! It melts in your mouth.”

“I’d love to see bacon growing,” I said with raised eyebrows. “Where I come from, it’s farmed from pigs.”

“What are pigs?” Una tilted her head.

“Fat pink animals that oink,” I explained. “Do you have anything like that here?”

“There are countless animals in All-the-land, but I haven’t met them all.” Una’s tail swished through the dirt to graze against my legs, but then it shot back to its previous position. “What are the pigs you know?”

“I don’t know any pigs personally,” I said. “The animals on Earth don’t talk.”

“Then how did you retrieve their bacon?” Una asked with an intense curiosity in her purple eyes. “How do you communicate with them? How do they sell their produce?”

“Well, uh, the farmers, um, kill them.” I raked a hand through my hair. I wasn’t sure how she would take the information, but seeing as how she was sort of a cat, I assumed she was a carnivore. She’d eaten bacon, but it grew like a plant, so maybe the people of All-the-land were against killing in general.

I knew how crazy that sounded, but maybe I needed to play along with my dream before it would let me wake up.

“That’s not very nice,” Una pointed out in a neutral tone, but her gaze flicked anxiously up and down my person, and there was a question in her eye.

“What?” I asked, and I had to admit I was a bit nervous about what she could be thinking.

Una opened her mouth like she was going to say something, but then she snapped her jaws shut and shook her head.

“It’s nothing.” Una smiled wide. “I’m just really happy you’re here. At last!”

I didn’t entirely believe her, but we’d only just met. I wasn’t about to call her out for withholding things from me, so I decided to let it go. There was only so much strangeness a man could take at once, after all.

“Tell me more about these potions,” I requested as I flashed her an encouraging smile. “Why did you take an agility potion? You’re already half cat, so wouldn’t you have more than enough to start with?”

“It’s a long story, but you know the end,” Una said. “Should I tell it backward or forward?”

“Start at the beginning,” I urged.

Una nodded, and she bit her bottom lip as she thought it over. Her purple eyes crossed as she went deep into thought, but I could practically see the light bulb illuminate above her head a moment later.

“All-the-land was founded long ago,” Una began.

“No, not that far into the beginning,” I cut her off before she could continue the extensive history lesson. While I was sure it was fascinating, I

wanted the highlights of our immediate situation, and whether or not anything else was after her.

“Oh.” Una looked a little deflated, but then her smile came back. “I will start with my escape from the Clover fortress.”

“Perfect.” I nodded my encouragement.

“They were performing experiments on me and the others,” Una explained. “Testing various potion mixtures to see if the side effects could be fixed. I believe the idea was a cat person would be immune to the clumsiness brought on by the agility potion.”

I didn’t know what a clover was or why they were experimenting on Una, but they didn’t sound like the nicest people.

“I’m glad you got out of there,” I said. “But I’m sorry you had to go through that. It must have been really hard to escape.”

“Before the potion wore off, I slipped out of my restraints and grabbed a couple potions from the table. I was already wanting another one at that point, so I drank ‘night vision’ to ease the cravings.” Una’s eyes turned dark as the memory passed through her mind. “The lights were all so bright, it was almost blinding.”

“What happened next?” I pressed as I leaned forward.

Una’s lips stretched into a wide, devilish smile. “I escaped.”

“What other potions did you take?” I asked.

These magical drinks could be useful if we encountered any other predators like the Sniffer Snatcher, but it seemed like they came with their own list of problems.

“Just the ‘big’,” Una sighed, and her shoulders slumped. “Those were the only ones in the room where I was being held, but fortunately I managed to bring it to you. I was almost scared to take it because it would be much harder to reach Havenwood at such a small size.”

“I still don’t understand how drinking ‘big’ would make you tiny,” I said.

“Once the potion wears off, the effects go in the opposite direction of its original purpose,” Una explained. “Big becomes tiny, agile becomes clumsy, and the effects can last hours or days depending on how much one takes...”

“That’s a double-edged sword,” I observed.

“What’s that?” Una asked with a curious tilt of her head.

“What’s what?” I asked.

“Not what, that,” she countered. “The double-edged sword?”

“Oh, that,” I laughed. “I just meant there’s good and bad sides to the potions.”

The thin, sweet air was going to my head, and I could feel my brain moving at a sluggish speed. I felt like I was losing my mind, or had lost it long ago, but this was just an elaborate dream, so I surrendered to the feeling.

“Potions used to be much more abundant long ago, before the Dark King took over the land,” Una explained. “Once he outlawed their use, they grew hard to find. Now, anyone who knows how to make them has long since been arrested, and the four queens seize any potions their soldiers find.”

“The Dark King?” I shook my head. “And something about four queens? How many bad guys are there in All-the-land?”

“There are many ways to die in All-the-land,” Una repeated. “You could have your pick of any one of them.”

“Awesome,” I sighed. “This is the weirdest dream I’ve ever had.”

“You do not appear to be asleep,” Una said. “Are you walking in your sleep?”

“I don’t think so?” I frowned. “But I can’t make myself wake up, either.”

Una reached across the distance between us and pinched my forearm.

“Ow,” I gasped.

A mischievous smile stretched across her face. “That hurt?”

“Yes,” I said as I rubbed the red spot on my arm.

“Will you come with me to Havenwood, Alex from Earth?” Una blinked rapidly, and her long eyelashes fluttered over her violet eyes. “I would like you to meet my friends. They have almost given up hope.”

“Hope for what?” I asked. I wasn’t certain if I wanted to go to this Havenwood place just yet, so I sidetracked instead of answering the question.

“Hope for your arrival,” Una said, and she leaned toward me as excitement filled her gaze. “Your coming was foretold long ago, Alex, and we are in desperate need of a savior. There can be only one Dreamer, and I believe you are he.”

“What exactly makes you think so besides I’m not from around here?” I asked with a disbelieving shake of my head.

“The prophecy says the Dreamer will come from a land far away, and he will banish the nightmares plaguing the land. We will know him by the strangeness of his words, the bravery of his actions, and his immunity to the potion opposition. Also, he will be quite silly. You seem very silly so far.”

“What exactly am I supposed to do to save All-the-land?” This was one wild dream, but who didn’t love a quest? “What’s plaguing the land?”

Nightmares?”

Una nodded. “The Dark King conquered All-the-land and unleashed his nightmare beasts upon the people who resisted his rule. They are terrifying and deadly, but they are everywhere, and they can sense fear.”

“Big bad nightmare guy and terrifying beasts. Got it.” I smirked. “What else is trying to kill us?”

“So, you’ll do it?” Una gasped as she bounced up and down. “You’ll save All-the-land?”

“I don’t know...” I avoided her eyes for a long moment as I thought of what to say to her.

I must be having some weird ‘chosen one’ type of dream where it was up to me to save a magical fantasy world, and I just couldn’t make myself wake up for some reason.

Was I actually in a coma or some medical situation?

I pictured myself in a hospital bed hooked up to a bunch of machines, but the thought was unsettling and didn’t feel right, so I dismissed it. The last thing I remembered clearly was the hot delivery girl coming inside my apartment with my dinner. Then images of a stray cat with a wide smile full of human teeth sprang into my mind, and I shook my head to dispel the

weird visual. Had I gone down some sort of rabbit hole into another dimension where cat-girls wanted me to save the world?

In the off chance this wasn't a dream, then I was in some serious trouble. I knew little survival skills, and I had no idea how to combat a scary Dark King or his following of queens.

I realized Una was still waiting for me to answer, so I took a deep, steadying breath.

"While I'd love to promise to save the world," I began, "the most I can guarantee is to help you get home safely. I'll go with you to Havenwood, but that's it."

A disappointed pout twisted Una's lips upside down. "Oh, okay."

"Tell me more about what's happening to All-the-land," I requested, but then my stomach growled loudly, and we both giggled. "I suppose we should eat something more than a couple pieces of bacon soon."

"I can feed you if you're hungry, you just have to follow along," Una said, and she rose to her feet. She tripped over her own ankle and almost fell over, but I put out a hand to catch her, and she used it to regain her balance. "Thank you again."

"No problem," I chuckled. "I am happy to catch you any time you're about to fall."

Una's big purple eyes practically melted into hearts, but she blinked rapidly as her expression turned neutral. "I'm not as familiar with this part of the forest, but I'm sure I can find something good for us to eat around here somewhere."

"I'm right behind you," I said, and I stood up and dusted off my hands. "But I am barefoot. My shoes fell apart when I got bigger."

"Shoes?" Una tilted her head to the side, and her tail twitched behind her. "What are shoes?"

"They're protective coverings for my feet," I said.

"Hmm," she snorted, and her gaze analyzed my cold toes. "Your feet are awfully bare. I wonder why there's no hair."

"Humans don't grow that much hair." I shrugged. "We're not hobbits."

"What's a hobbit?" Una asked.

"A halfling human-like thing from a book," I explained, but then my stomach growled again, and I flashed her a cheeky grin. "You were leading the way to some food?"

"Indeed." Una nodded, and she swiveled on her heels before marching away from the campfire. She certainly had spunk, and a good attitude despite recently escaping from prison. On top of that, she was the

sanest thing I'd encountered in this dreamland, so I wasn't about to let her out of my sight.

I hurried to keep up with the cat-girl's brisk pace, and my bare feet found every sharp rock along the way. I supposed my feet would toughen up eventually, but in the meantime, it was taking some getting used to.

Una led me away from the fire into the shadows of the trees, and she paused a couple of times to sniff the air before continuing onward. She zig-zagged beneath the branches, curved around the trunks, and circled back to sniff the air she'd already smelled.

"Are we... lost?" I asked in a hesitant voice.

"No...?" Una glanced at me over her shoulder, and her grin never faltered. "There's a noodle tree around here somewhere, I just know it. They're fairly common."

"A noodle tree?"

"Don't you have those where you come from?" Una questioned.

"They're everywhere."

"Nope." I shook my head even though she couldn't see me while I walked behind her. "We have fruit trees, though. Apples, oranges, lemons, even avocados. Stuff like that."

“Sounds yummy,” Una mused. “We should go there and get some fruit. I want to try it.”

“If I knew how to get back home, then I wouldn’t still be here,” I pointed out, although it would be a shame to leave the cat-girl behind in my dream when I woke up. She was growing on me faster than I wanted to admit.

“Well, how did you get here?” Una asked.

“I’m not sure...” I glanced around to see if anyone or anything was listening, but we were alone in the woods. “I woke up in the field full of laughing flowers, and I barely remember what happened before. Did you... Did you bring me here to All-the-land?”

“How would I accomplish such a thing?” Una shot me a quizzical glance over her shoulder. “I’ve been a captive of the Clover Queen since before last night.”

“I guess you have a point.” I frowned as I thought it over.

The last thing I remembered was letting Anna inside my apartment, and my stomach growled as I pictured the large meat lover’s pizza and spicy buffalo wings. I suddenly had a flash of memory, and I saw the delivery girl take a huge bite of pizza in my mind’s eye. I’d scarfed down my food quickly, but then I sat there and awkwardly watched her eat. When

she'd finished, she'd wiped her face with a paper towel and gave me the brightest smile before she'd pulled a plastic bag out of her cleavage.

The stunning redhead had proceeded to pop what looked like mushrooms into her mouth and chewed away. I'd gaped in shock for several moments, and then she laughed as she offered me the bag.

"Wanna have sex while tripping?" Anna had asked with a sly smile.

Hell to the yeah I did.

Anna's words repeated in my head as the memory faded, and realization settled into my brain. I'd taken magic mushrooms and went on a sexy, fun trip with the beautiful delivery girl, but somehow I'd ended up in a fantasy land where flowers laughed and cats were hot girls.

Was I just hallucinating?

I shook my head to clear my thoughts, but I was already getting accustomed to the feeling of confusion I'd experienced ever since waking up in this strange place. I had a feeling the air wasn't just oxygen, and I resisted the urge to giggle at the very notion. The euphoric sensation wasn't as strong in these woods as it had been in the area Una referred to as the Happy Fields, and it made it easier to think clearly, but I wasn't entirely myself yet, either.

“Hey, Una,” I said in an effort to distract myself. “Is there anything else that could eat us in these woods?”

“All-the-land is a dangerous place,” Una replied over her shoulder. “The Dark King’s minions are everywhere.”

“What was it like before the Dark King took over?” I asked.

The cat-girl’s tail swayed as she walked ahead of me, and I found myself mesmerized by the movement. The stripes of her appendage were almost hypnotic, but the bouncing of her ass cheeks beneath the edge of her tunic was even more fascinating. I tried not to stare for too long, but she kept her gaze forward, so I stole a few glances every couple of paces.

“Magical,” Una breathed after a long moment of silence. “Celebration was a way of life, but now we all cower in fear.”

“I’m sure there are still things to celebrate,” I said. “Like your escape. Won’t your friends be happy to see you safe and well?”

“They would be happier if my mission were a complete success,” Una sighed. “I failed to rescue some of my friends from the clutches of the Clover Queen.”

Una came to a halt, and she sniffed the air curiously before she adjusted her direction slightly.

“But you managed to escape,” I pointed out. “Isn’t that a victory?”

“I put myself in the grasp of the clover cards in order to recover something very important, but it’s useless without the proper person to peruse it.” Una shook her head with a solemn air. “I failed to rescue the Potion Master and the others, so the recipe is all but useless. I have failed.”

“I don’t really understand what you’re talking about,” I said, “but I’m sorry. I’m sure your friends will be happy to see you, regardless of the success or failure of your mission.”

“Thank you, Alex.” Una turned to look at me with a sweet smile. “I cannot wait to tell them I found the Dreamer. It will make me feel like less of a failure.”

“You’re welcome.” I grinned back at her.

“The noodle tree is close,” she said, and she turned to sniff the air again. “This way.”

I followed her around a couple more trees, and then we came to a small clearing. Standing in the center of the opening, a tall, strange-looking tree grew. It resembled a weeping willow, except the limbs looked softer. Then my eyes widened as I stepped closer and realized it was growing spaghetti noodles, complete with sauce. I even spotted a few seed pods that looked like meatballs dangling from the pasta branches.

“This is awesome!” I gasped as I grabbed a hold of a strand of noodle and yanked it free from the tree.

The noodles were as thick as my fingers, and perfectly cooked. The flavor of the sauce was balanced and savory, and I sucked up the strand with a loud slurp. Sauce splattered against my lips, and I licked them clean with a quick dash of my tongue before I reached for more pasta.

“I’m glad you like it,” Una giggled, and she helped herself to a long noodle branch. “Noodle trees are one of my favorite foods.”

“So, all your food just grows already cooked like this?” I asked.
“What else do you eat?”

Una shrugged. “Whatever is there for me.”

If there were bacon plants and noodle trees, I could only imagine what other delicacies were available in All-the-land, and the urge to explore every last inch of this magical fantasy land filled my chest. The desire to wake up was less urgent, and I decided to enjoy my dream while it lasted.

We ate our fill of the spaghetti, and Una shoved a few meatballs into her hip pouch to snack on later. Then we headed back to our campfire side by side. Una shot me sideways smiles the whole trip, and by the time the flames of my little fire came into view, a blush crept up my neck.

The two of us returned to our cross-legged positions near the fire, and I stoked the flames into a blaze. The half-burnt logs tumbled against each other as they began to fall apart, and sparks flew into the air. The twinkling lights were reflected in Una's deep-purple eyes, and I found myself staring into the swirling violet depths.

"Do I have sap on my face?" Una asked in a self-conscious tone as a blush darkened her cheeks.

"No," I assured her, and I considered sharing my thoughts, but I didn't want to scare her off. I was in a dream world, though, so what the hell. "I was staring at your beautiful eyes. I feel like I'm drowning in them, but if that's drowning, then I don't want to breathe."

"Oh," Una breathed, and her eyes twinkled with amusement. "Do you know how to swim?"

I couldn't tell if she was being serious or flirting, but it didn't matter either way. I had a feeling I'd swim across an ocean for her, and all she had to do was flutter her long eyelashes.

"Absolutely." I nodded emphatically. "Do you like water?"

"Not particularly," Una admitted. "But it doesn't like me, either, so it's fair."

“That’s good,” I chuckled, and I stretched my hands out to the fire just for something to do with my hands other than scooping her up. “Will we have to cross any water to get to Havenwood?”

I found myself staring at her lips, and I was fascinated by the way she formed her words.

“I’m not sure how far we’ve gone from the Happy Fields,” Una said. “There could be places to drown if that’s what you’re after.”

“Not particularly,” I laughed, but then a serious thought crossed my mind. “Do you know how to get to Havenwood from here?”

“Probably.” Una shrugged. “Do you?”

“Not in the slightest,” I said. “But you’re sure we’re not lost?”

“I’m positive.” Una nodded.

“I trust you,” I said.

Una winked. “A wise choice.”

We stared into the fire in silence for a while, but after several moments, I stretched my arms out and yawned. It had already been a long day, and it seemed still close to noon. I’d been chased by a giant dog-monster and stretched to gigantic proportions, though, and that had a way of wearing a guy out. I didn’t want to fall asleep if there were any enemies or

predators lurking about, and I'd promised to protect Una, so I fought off my weariness with a few deep breaths.

The mysterious cat-girl eyed me sideways a few times during my stretches, and her ears twitched toward me with every noise I made. It was growing steadily more obvious she was just as fascinated by me as I was by her, but I wasn't complaining.

"I'm so glad you're finally here, Alex the Dreamer," Una said in a soft voice, and the silence was broken. "All-the-land has been waiting for you for a very long time."

"I'm not sure if I'm this savior you think I am," I said in a cautious tone. "But I made you a promise. I'll get you back to Havenwood, but then it's going to be time for me to wake up."

"Your eyes are open, but your mind is closed." Una shook her head, and a tragic expression crossed her face. "You are the Dreamer, Alex. There is no other explanation."

"So, what? I'm supposed to go challenge the Dark King to a duel?" I snorted. "I think you've got the wrong guy."

"There is no other guy," Una pointed out. "All our men are sick, dead, or turned."

"Turned?" I asked.

“The Dark King has many minions, powerful sorcerers among them, and they turned a great many of our men into the smiling trees,” Una sighed, and her eyes welled with emotion. “The men who were left behind are shells of their former selves. It’s fallen to the women to do what needs to be done, but there were no warriors left after the Great Turmoil, so we’ve been living in hiding ever since.”

“But there were potions back then, too, right?” I asked. “Why wouldn’t your soldiers just drink a bunch of the magic stuff before they went after the Dark King?”

“Oh, they did.” Una’s chin quivered. “That’s why they are so weak today. Havenwood is a safe place where the injured and dependent can go to be cared for.”

“So, All-the-land is run by women?” I furrowed my brow as I thought it over. “What about this Queen of Clovers you mentioned?”

“The Dark King’s sorcerers brought the Deck of Cards to life after the Great Turmoil,” Una explained. “They are more of his minions, only more powerful. The Four Queens rule over All-the-land with iron fists and flawless style. It would be foolish to underestimate them. There is no doubt in my mind, I would not have been able to escape without the assistance of the agility potion.”

“What can we do about it, though?” I shook my head. “That sounds like a complicated mess and a whole slew of enemies aiming for our heads.”

“Which is why we hold onto hope someday the Dreamer will appear in All-the-land and save us all.” Una’s eyes were earnest as she held my gaze. “Without the Dreamer, All-the-land is doomed to fall beneath the shadow of the Dark King for all time. I... I cannot lose hope.”

“Why not just leave this land and go somewhere the Dark King cannot reach you?” I worked the muscle in my jaw. “It doesn’t sound like you have anyone left who can fight him off.”

“You’re telling me to give up hope, Alex of Earth?” Una tilted her head to the side, but her purple eyes were solemn. “Abandon my friends and family? Surrender my home to the shadows of darkness?”

“Well, when you put it that way... No?” I ran a hand through my hair. “I’m just saying, the Dark King sounds like really bad news, and I don’t think I’m the right guy for the job. I’m just an average dude. The fact I’m even having this dream in the first place is pretty phenomenal.”

“I am ready for you to wake up, Alex,” Una said with a decisive nod. “Wake up and realize I speak the truth. You are the Dreamer, and you’re going to save All-the-land.”

“Tell me more about Havenwood,” I said to redirect the topic away from the prophesied coming of the Dreamer. “What’s it like?”

“To find it you must know it,” Una said, and her demeanor brightened as the subject changed. “It is a secret known by many.”

“That doesn’t sound very safe...” I had my doubts about the abilities of the locals to protect themselves since Una had said all the warriors were gone, which meant there wasn’t anyone capable of protecting me while I figured out how to get back home.

“It is well-hidden,” Una assured me. “To the ignorant eye, it would appear to be a part of the land itself.”

“It’s built in a tree or something?” That sounded cool.

“You will love it, Alex, I just know it.” Una bounced up and down with an excited smile stretched across her face. “Can we go now?”

I took stock of where I was at and what was happening, and I had to admit I was in sorry shape for travel. My feet were sore and scratched up, my clothes were in tatters, and my entire body was stiff from the morning’s adventures.

“If you don’t mind, I need to rest a little while longer,” I confessed. “After drinking the big potion and fighting with the Sniffer Snatcher, I’m pretty worn out.”

“I will make you some foot wrappings while you rest,” Una suggested, and she bounded to her feet only to topple over.

I yet again managed to reach out and catch her, but this time I didn’t comment on her clumsiness since at this point I was starting to get used to it. Una skipped away with her tail swaying happily behind her, and I had to chuckle at her childlike attitude. I found her highly appealing to my senses, and I already missed her presence by my side.

“Will you alert me if something happens?” I asked as I stretched out onto my back in the dirt. “I just want to close my eyes for a moment.”

“I will wake you if I need you,” Una promised, but I wasn’t sure if I would be able to sleep inside a dream.

Maybe falling asleep here would cause me to wake up back in my apartment?

While it would be nice to wake up to a naked red-haired delivery girl in my bed, the prospect of getting to know Una better was even more enticing, so a big part of me hoped I stayed in the dream world.

Still, I had to try it before I made what was sure to be a long walk to Una’s home, so I shut my eyes gently, rested my hands behind my head, and let out a deep exhale. Then I tried to clear my mind for a while, but I was

unsuccessful. Any time I had banished all thought, the image of a smiling cat would pop back into my brain.

What did it mean?

Was I having a dream within a dream?

How many mushrooms did I eat?

I eventually managed to regulate my breathing enough to drift into a brief sleep, but a feeling of urgency roused me shortly after. I was more confused than ever when I gave up and decided to open my eyes, but I gasped the instant I blinked. Hovering directly above me with wide-eyed intensity was the curious cat-girl, but she didn't move when she realized I was awake. Her knees were pressed into the bed beside me hips, so I wasn't bearing any of her weight, but I could feel the warmth radiating from her.

"What happened?" I asked. "Is everything okay?"

"Everything is just as it was and will be for a time," Una assured me. Her breath smelled of spaghetti and bacon, and her lips were inches from mine, but then she winked and hopped off me. "Until you change things, that is how they will remain."

"Do you usually watch people sleep like that?" I asked as I pushed myself up onto my elbows.

"Did I upset you?" Una tilted her head, and her tail flicked anxiously.

“No,” I said. “Just startled me. I’m not used to people crouching on my chest and staring at me like that, awake or asleep. What were you doing?”

“I noticed you have a little bit of fur, too,” Una said. “On top of your head, and coming out of your face.”

“That’s called a beard,” I explained.

“Beard?” Una asked as she pointed to her nose. “The hairs growing from your face holes are long. Do they keep your face warm?”

“To a degree,” I chuckled. “But that’s not a beard. A beard is the scruffy hair on my chin and neck.”

Then I grabbed her hand and held it against my face where a five o’clock shadow was emerging. Una’s eyes lit up with excitement as she rubbed the pads of her palms against the grain, and her lips parted ever so slightly as her gaze trailed to my lips.

Fuck, I wanted to kiss her.

Instead, I released her hand and smiled softly. “See, that’s a beard.”

“Oh.” Una’s lips formed an adorable little circle as her eyes locked onto the ground. “T-Thank you for... showing me.”

The moment was over, but the tension between us was palpable, and I swallowed down the lump rising in my throat. While I was getting some

hints she was interested in me, I wanted to be absolutely certain before I made a move on the sexy blue-purple cat-girl. She might be part animal, but I wasn't, so I could be a gentleman for a little while longer.

"You're welcome." I cleared my throat. "Are you ready to go to Havenwood?"

"Yes, and so are you!" Una gasped, and she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. The adorable cat-girl flourished her hands at my feet, and I peered down at the brown leaves wrapped around them. "I almost forgot! I made you footwraps."

"Oh, wow, Una, that's awesome." I grinned as I pushed myself up to a standing position to try them out, and I shifted my weight experimentally from foot to foot. The wrappings stayed put, and they protected my feet from the majority of the painful sensations. They were a far cry from a pair of Nikes, but they were more than appreciated. "Thank you, Una. We'll be able to travel much faster than if I was barefoot."

"I'm glad you're pleased with your feet." Una planted her hands on her hips and nodded curtly as her tail waved behind her like a victory flag. "Now, we just need to put out the fire before we leave."

"I got it." I grinned, but I waved my hands to shoo her away before I reached for my waistband. "Go behind a tree or something while I relieve

myself.”

“Oohh...” Una giggled, but she obediently scampered away. I wasn’t sure if she would peek or not, but I didn’t really care anyway.

Once I doused the flames, I buckled my pants back up, and the two of us turned our backs on the smoking remains of the embers and headed into the woods. I resisted the urge to reach out and grab her hand, but my fingers itched to touch hers. I followed her through the trees, and she started to sniff the air again. After she’d found the noodle tree, I trusted her nose, so I was happy to let her take the lead again.

“What’s Earth like, Alex?” Una asked me in a curious tone, but I couldn’t see her face as she walked ahead of me.

“It’s pretty boring,” I said. “All-the-land is much more interesting.”

“What’s boring? What makes it pretty? Why is All-the-land interesting?” Una rattled off question after question without pausing long enough for me to reply.

I tried to answer her the best I could, but the moment I answered one question, she peppered me with ten more. It was impossible to keep up, and after a while I surrendered to the soundtrack of her babbling voice. It was actually comforting to hear someone talking in the silence of the woods.

After a while, her non-stop questions finally ceased, and I was able to get a word in edgewise.

“So, how did you get captured?” I asked.

The beautiful cat-girl didn’t answer me for a long moment, and I wondered if she’d heard me, but then she came to a halt.

“I was trying to save my friends,” Una said as she turned to face me. For once, there was no smile on her face, and her violet eyes were solemn. “They were traveling when they were arrested, and I was attempting to break them free. I failed...”

“What will happen to them?” I swallowed hard.

“The women will be given over to the Dark King,” Una said, and she glared down at the ground. “The men will be used for menial labor or experimentation. If it weren’t for those clover cards... My friends shouldn’t be in there.”

Una wouldn’t meet my eyes for a long moment, and I had the strange feeling she wasn’t telling me everything, but then again, I was just as new to her as she was to me. I’d needed to be patient and get to know her a little better before I rushed to judgement. Finally, her violet eyes lifted to mine, and there was determination in her gaze.

“You could help me save them,” Una insisted. “Together, we would succeed. I know it.”

“Hey, I would love to help you,” I said. “But I could wake up at any minute. The most I can promise is to get you back to Havenwood safely.”

“But... But you’re the Dreamer,” the cat-girl argued, and she planted her feet firmly. “If you’re not here to help save All-the-land, then what are you doing here?”

“Dreaming?” I shrugged. “I don’t even know what’s going on. I’m in some strange forest talking to a cat-girl who, may I add, was being chased by a giant dog-monster when I met her!”

Una blinked at me, but I started to pace back and forth as my rant gained steam.

“I didn’t ask for this, hell, I didn’t even ask for a vacation, but here I am,” I said as I gestured vaguely around me. “This is great and everything, but terrifying at the same time, and just because you’re hot doesn’t mean I’m going to run off risking my life.”

“Alex,” Una said.

“No, I’m serious.” I held up my hands to stop her words. “I’m just a normal guy. I’m nobody’s hero.”

“Alex,” Una repeated, and her voice was full of urgency.

“What?” I asked.

“Behind you,” the cat-girl whispered, and her eyes flicked to something over my shoulder.

“Okay...” I turned slowly as my heartrate increased, and I held my breath as I peered carefully over my shoulder.

Hovering behind me was a dark figure, and I blinked rapidly to make sure I was seeing clearly. It looked like a black ghost or a floating cloak, and I was reminded of the Dementors from the Harry Potter books.

“W-What is that thing?” I asked as I staggered backward away from the ghoulisish figure.

“A-A n-nightmare!” Una gasped out, and she grabbed my arm to pull me away from the shadowy thing. “Run, Alex!”

I didn’t need any further prompting to get the fuck out of there, and I turned around to book it at full speed.

I had no idea what the thing behind us was going to do, but if it had Una so freaked out, then I wasn’t going to ask any questions. She’d already assured me more than once there was more than one way to die in All-the-land, and I suspected I’d just discovered number two.

“Wake up, wake up, wake up,” I chanted as I ran at breakneck speed, and I dodged between the trees as I chased after Una. “Come on, Alex, time

to wake up!”

Nothing happened, so I focused all my energy on outrunning the nightmare behind me.

I wasn't about to die in the coolest dream I'd ever had.

At least not before I got to know the beautiful cat-girl better.

Chapter Four

I crashed through the underbrush after the blue-purple cat-girl, and I stole a glance over my shoulder at the floating black cloak that chased after us. It was about thirty feet behind me, but it was quickly gaining ground. I didn't see any legs, so I wasn't sure how it was even moving at all, but its lack of limbs didn't seem to slow it down any.

“What the fuck is that thing?” I panted as I ran behind Una as fast as I could.

The cat-girl's blue-purple tail flicked rapidly back and forth as she hopped forward, but she almost tripped over a root. Fortunately, she caught her balance and didn't fall down, but she staggered a little as she regained her footing. She glanced over her shoulder at me, but her purple eyes widened with fear, and I could only assume the shadowy figure was gaining on us.

“Run!” Una yelled, and she pumped her arms as she continued on even faster. “Don't let it touch you!”

What the fuck. What. The. Actual. Fuck.

This wasn't a dream. It was a nightmare.

Sweat dappled my forehead, and I could only imagine the state my armpits were in. I wanted to look behind me, but the thought of slowing down had zero appeal. Still, I had to know what I was up against, so I cast a quick glance over my shoulder.

The black-hooded figure hovered twenty paces or so behind us, and I could see the wind blowing beneath the tattered ends of the cloak. Everything it passed over drained of color, and I gasped as I watched green grass turn monochrome before it withered and died.

If that thing could drain all the life from a plant as it passed over it, I could only imagine what it was capable of if it ever managed to catch me.

I wasn't about to find out, though, so I ran with all my might.

Then Una began to stumble again, so I hesitated just long enough to throw her onto my back. The petite cat-girl immediately clung to my shoulders, but she hardly weighed anything, so she didn't slow me down very much at all. With the cat-girl suffering from a lack of agility, it would be better for both of us if I carried her to safety.

"Left!" Una urged into my ear, and she pulled on my shirt.

I adjusted my trajectory and darted between the trunks of the trees as I kicked my legs. My muscles burned, and my calves were screaming, but I didn't dare stop.

Stopping meant death. I was certain of it.

“How... Do we... Get away?” I gasped out between frantic leg pumps.

“We keep running,” Una said in my ear. “And hope they find something else to chase.”

I kept running, and I swerved between trees in an effort to put some distance between me and my pursuer.

“What happens if we stop?” I didn’t want to know, but I also had to know.

“The nightmare will suck all the joy out of you until there is nothing but fear left,” Una hissed in my ear. “Now, go faster before that happens to us!”

“Yes, ma’am!” I didn’t need any further prompting, but I knew I couldn’t keep running forever. I’d have to stop eventually, but I didn’t know what I would do then.

The forest began to subtly shift around me as I ran, but I saw only streaks of color in my peripheral vision. The leaves were brightly-colored here, and more green things grew beneath the shadows of the trees. It was like the mountain forest was becoming a jungle around me.

I ran in a zig-zag pattern, and I made sure to keep several trees between myself and the nightmare thing. I didn't think it had anything to shoot at me, but I wasn't about to risk it on chance. There were a couple of times I could feel the cold air whooshing away from the nightmare as it got closer to me, but the chill only served as further motivation to get the fuck away from it.

I wasn't sure how much more I could take, and Una's weight started to sap my energy from me. I was beginning to falter and stumble every few paces, but the nightmare was quite a ways behind us, so I took the risk and slowed down slightly. Una's head whipped around to check on our pursuer, and her claws dug into the muscles on my shoulders. I could feel the anxiety radiating from her petite form, and I wanted more than anything to protect her.

I just didn't know exactly how to do that when there was a ghoulish nightmare creature after us who could kill us with one touch.

How was I supposed to win against that?

"Help!" a voice called out ahead of me. "It's going to get me!"

I didn't know what had spoken, but I didn't see any people anywhere.

Could the trees have been talking?

I wouldn't put it past them, but none of the trees around me had faces, so I didn't think they'd called out for help. I didn't have time to find whoever had yelled, but a pang of guilt twisted my stomach. I only hoped whoever it was managed to get away from the nightmare creature before it drained the life out of them.

"Help!" the voice said again, and my eyes scanned over the forest floor ahead.

There, a few paces away from me, was what looked like a bouncing ball of fur. It hopped closer onto the path ahead of me, but as I ran past, it jumped up and clung to my leg. I glanced down at the brown fuzzy circle attached to the remains of my slacks, but I didn't have time to question it.

"Thank you!" the ball of fur gushed. "I was almost a goner!"

"We picked up more passengers," Una informed me in my ear.

"Don't worry, furbaes are harmless."

I glanced down at the ball of fur again, and I shook my head in awe at the extreme level of ridiculousness that seemed to be my life now. This dream just got weirder and weirder with every passing moment, and now I was a passenger cart for creatures escaping the nightmare. At least the tiny ball of fur didn't weigh me down.

"Harmless, huh?" I asked in an out of breath voice.

I was quickly coming to the end of my energy, but I didn't dare stop or even slow down beyond a bouncing jog. I didn't want to find out what would happen to me and my new friends if that thing caught up to us, but I had a feeling it would mean the dream was over.

Whether or not I ever woke up again was another question.

I was putting even more distance between the nightmare and me, but I didn't know how much longer I could keep it up. My clothes were drenched in sweat, and my hair was plastered to my forehead, but I ignored the discomfort.

It was a much better alternative to dying.

"Help... me!" another voice called out through the shadows of the forest. "Don't... let... it... get... me!"

Then a clump of gray suddenly fell from the branches above, and I grunted beneath the additional weight. Long, fur-covered arms wrapped around my neck, and hanging from them was a sloth with a grateful smile plastered on its face. It hung down my chest like a purse strap, and it bounced against my hip with each step I took.

"Thank... you... so... much!" The sloth creature tightened its grip on me, and I could tell I wasn't getting away from it easily.

"Una?" I asked in a tentative voice. "Friendly?"

The cat-girl popped her head up over my shoulder, and she peered down my chest at the sloth creature clinging to my person. “Hello.”

“Hi.” The sloth person’s smile widened. “Thanks... for... the... ride.”

“You didn’t even ask first,” I gasped out mid-run.

“No... time... like... the... present... for... staying alive,” the sloth person squeaked out, and then it glanced behind me. “I’d hurry... if I... were you. The nightmare... draws... steadily closer!”

“It would be a lot easier if I wasn’t... carrying a bunch of extra weight,” I gritted out past my burning lungs.

“Less talking, more running,” Una urged in my ear.

The cat-girl had given the sloth-thing approval, so I refocused on moving my legs as fast as I could. I didn’t risk the energy it would take to look back, and I kept my eyes locked on the forest floor in front of my feet. I could feel the ball of fur wiggle its way higher up my pants leg, but it settled in around my belt after a while.

I wasn’t sure how long I’d been running, but I suddenly burst through the tree cover and into a brightly lit field of tall grasses. Birds screamed in alarm as I dashed into the clearing, and the sound of wings fluttering filled the air.

There was nowhere to run to, and I wasn't sure if the nightmare creature had a strong sense of sight and smell or not, but I didn't think we'd be able to hide. I had to do something, though, so I dashed across the clearing toward the next tree line.

"Where are you going?" Una asked. "Havenwood is in the other direction."

"How am I supposed to know that?" I gasped for breath and readjusted her weight on my back. "I'm new to the area, remember?"

"Go to the right!" The cat-girl pulled on my shirt on the right side as if she could steer me like a car. "Head away from the sun."

I nodded, and I adjusted my direction so the heat of the sun shone upon the back of my head. It was a little after mid-day by this point, but I had no idea where I was going, so I would just have to trust Una's judgement. I glanced down at the sloth person and the ball of fur who was still clinging to me, and I shook my head in amazement.

This was the wildest dream I'd ever had.

The nightmare creature changed direction, too, but I managed to put more distance between us. It hovered over the ground with an ominous air, and the hooded head stayed locked in our direction.

I ran and ran for what seemed like an eternity, but I was running on fumes at this point. I wouldn't be able to carry my passengers for much longer, but the nightmare creature still followed behind us. It had flagged slightly when we passed through the clearing, and I wondered if it was intolerant of the sunshine.

I decided to test out my theory, and I aimed for the brightest spots on the forest floor. Sure enough, every time I glanced back over my shoulder, the nightmare creature slowed down to avoid the sunlight. The shadowy black figure skirted around the warm places where the sun shone through the foliage, and in doing so, put even more distance between us.

"How much further?" I gasped out, and it took everything in me to continue to pump my legs up and down.

"We are getting closer," Una assured me. "But Havenwood is a full day's journey from the Happy Fields where we first met."

That gave me a little bit more information to work with, and I glanced up at the sun's progress across the sky. I wasn't sure how long I'd been running, but it had been close to mid-day when Una and I found the noodle tree. Plus, I'd covered a lot of ground in my giant form after drinking the 'big' potion.

The nightmare creature carved a path across the landscape behind us, and every time I glanced backward, there was more death and decay before my eyes. At this rate, the shadowy figure of death would kill the entire forest trying to get to us.

“Will we be safe from the nightmare once we get there?” I asked as I stole another look at our pursuer.

“It is well-hidden within plain view,” Una said, and I could feel her nodding against my shoulder. “We will be safe there, I promise.”

“I didn’t think there was any safe haven in this land with the way you describe it,” I grunted. “You said I could take my pick of multiple ways to die, but I’d rather a strange cloak thing wasn’t one of them.”

“Less talking, more running, please!” the ball of hair squeaked, and it nestled tighter against my waist band. “Dumo, dumo!”

“What does ‘dumo’ mean?” I asked.

“It means ‘please’ in furbaeish,” Una explained.

The strange talking ball of fur definitely reminded me of the toy Furby I had as a kid, but I didn’t have time for nineties nostalgia, and I tucked the thought away for later consideration.

A whoosh of wind whipped past my head as I spotted the long tendril-like fingers of the nightmare creature reaching out to grab us, and I

scampered forward at an increased speed.

The furbae was right. I needed to do less talking and more running, and I would ignore the fact that I was practically a walking zoo at this point since it didn't look like I was about to lose a passenger any time soon. I was amazed at my own ability to maintain my rapid speed, but the threat of death looming behind me was more than motivating.

Here I was, running for my life and talking to a ball of fur and a cat-girl. This had to be the craziest thing I'd ever experienced, and I couldn't remember ever having such an immersive dream before. I didn't know what would happen if the nightmare caught up to me, and I was half-tempted to stop and find out, but something in me said that was a bad idea, so I kept running.

The nightmare creature slid through the shadows of the forest, and it moved from tree to tree at blinding speed, but it was hard to keep track of it while I crashed through the underbrush and hopped over roots. How I'd managed to get this far this fast without tripping was beyond me, but I was grateful for my luck.

I hoped my luck would hold for a little while longer.

"That way," Una directed with a pointed finger toward the left. "I recognize this area!"

“We’re getting close?” I asked.

“Definitely.” I felt Una nod against my shoulder. “Not much farther, Alex, you can do this!”

“Okay,” I panted. “I got this.”

I gathered all my remaining strength, and I burst forward with renewed vigor. The prospect of a safe haven was looking better with each passing moment, and I held onto the thought as motivation. I pictured a veritable Garden of Eden with tall walls to keep out all the nightmares, and a lavish spread of food prepared just for me.

We passed through another sunny clearing, and by the time I hit the opposite tree line, the nightmare creature was even further away from me. I resisted the urge to do a victory dance since we still weren’t safe, but any distance between me and death was appreciated.

“Hold on,” Una said, and she tugged on my shirt. “I’m sorry, Alex, but you have to slow down.”

“It’s going to catch back up to us any second now,” I argued.

“But Havenwood is very near here,” the cat-girl countered. “I must find the river.”

“I... can... hear... it,” the sloth person wrapped around my chest said in a slow voice. “We... are... close...”

Of course, the sloth would talk in an annoyingly slow voice, and I snorted with amusement. I'd lost my mind somewhere, and I wasn't sure if it was ever going to come back. There was no logical explanation for my current predicament, and yet, there I was, running from a nightmare with a sloth person, a furbae, and a cat-girl.

The whole thing was ridiculous to the point of being hilarious.

"Do you hear the water, Alex?" Una asked, and she climbed higher up onto my back to look around.

I listened carefully as I trotted beneath the branches of the trees, and then I heard the rushing sound of water falling.

"Yes!" I gasped.

"Run for the water!" Una urged, and she wrapped her arms tightly around me. "Hurry!"

My breaths were coming in ragged pants, and my clothes were drenched in sweat, but I pressed forward with the last dregs of my energy. I didn't know how much further I could go, but I'd already come so far. There was no turning back now, especially not when certain death laid behind me.

The sound of running water grew steadily louder as I ran toward it, and then I burst through the bushes to see a huge waterfall. Water sprayed

in every direction from a tall outcropping of rock, and it poured over the stone wall to fall into a river below. Foam churned up where the water landed, and the roar was deafening. Ferns grew everywhere, and a small, dirt path curved along the riverbed.

“What now?” I skidded to a halt at the edge of the stone wall, and I glanced over my shoulder at Una.

“Keep going!” she urged, and she bounced on my back. “We are almost there!”

“Keep going where?” I asked as I looked around. There were no signs of buildings or civilization anywhere, but then again, the cat-girl wasn’t exactly what I would call civilized.

Maybe homes looked a little different in All-the-land?

“Under... the... waterfall, of... course,” the sloth person said.

“Seriously?” I asked, but I didn’t see any way to do that without getting wet.

I marched toward the waterfall with my passengers in tow anyway, and as I drew closer to the rushing water, the flow of the river began to move. The water shifted more and more the closer I got, and then a hole in the stone wall was revealed behind the waterfall. I trotted up to the entrance and peered inside.

It was a tunnel.

I paused at the entrance to look back, but I didn't see the nightmare creature. I didn't hear anything except the wind blowing through the branches of the trees, and I sighed in relief.

Maybe we'd finally outrun it?

I didn't want to question our luck, so I darted inside the dark stone tunnel without another thought. The water immediately shifted back to cover the opening, and we were cast into total darkness. A faint light illuminated the far end of the tunnel, and I could only assume it led to Havenwood.

Una slid from my back, and the cat-girl crumpled to the damp floor of the tunnel with a deep sigh.

"That was close!" Her voice was full of relief, but I couldn't blame her.

"Alright, everyone off," I said to the sloth person and the furbae creature. "Ride's over. You're safe now. I think..."

I leaned against the cool stone wall, and my shoulders slumped with exhaustion. I could still feel the warm print of Una's body on my back, and my shirt was clinging damply to my skin like the sloth to my chest. My

heart hammered out a staccato beat against my ribcage, and it showed no signs of slowing down.

“Come on, Alex,” Una said, and she jumped to her feet. “Havenwood is straight ahead. I can’t wait for everyone to meet you! They’ll be so excited I found the Dreamer!”

I was too exhausted to argue with her that I wasn’t the Dreamer since I’d only just escaped death moments before, so I just took a moment to take deep gulps of air into my burning lungs.

I’d never run that much in my life, but we’d finally made it to safety.

I hoped, anyway.

“The Dreamer is real?” the furbae squeaked as it bounced free from my pants leg to the ground. “Where is he?”

“Right in front of you,” Una said in a proud tone. “Open your eyes.”

I wasn’t sure if the bouncing ball of fur had eyes or any other facial features, but I didn’t mention this to the blue-purple striped cat-girl. She was more familiar with the furbaes than I was, so I trusted her not to say something rude to our new friend.

“It is kind of hard to see in near total darkness,” I pointed out. “Let’s get out of this tunnel.”

“This way!” Una said, and she rushed down the length of the tunnel away from the waterfall. “With only a few more steps we will arrive!”

I staggered after her with the sloth person still clinging to my chest, and the furbae bounced along beside me at a brisk pace. It was hard to make my body move at all, but I forced myself to press onward. Water splashed beneath my feet, and my foot wrappings were soaked already, but they’d done their job. I hadn’t even thought about my feet during the mad race through the forest, but the coolness of the damp tunnel floor felt amazing.

Then we emerged from the other end of the tunnel, and I was blinded by the brightness of the light after being in complete darkness. I blinked rapidly to clear the fuzziness from my eyes, and then I looked around. My jaw fell open immediately, and I opened and closed my eyes once more to make sure I was seeing correctly.

Before my eyes was a colorful, radiant garden. Birds with rainbow feathers flew through the air, and flowers bloomed everywhere I looked. Butterflies flitted from petal to petal without a care in the world, and bees buzzed between bushes like they were on a deadline.

“Una!” a voice called out, and I whipped my head around in search of who had spoken.

“Una has returned!” another voice said.

“Una is safe!” another cheered.

Multiple other voices combined together to say the same thing, and they all chanted the cat-girl’s name in celebration. Una grinned wide, and she spun in a circle in front of the tunnel entrance to the chorus of greetings. I still couldn’t see any people anywhere, but that didn’t mean we weren’t surrounded by the cat-girl’s friends. The ball of hair at my side was proof enough of that.

All-the-land was full of ridiculous things, I could already tell, but that didn’t mean it was any easier to process the fact that I’d just saved a ball of fur and a talking sloth from a hovering cloak thing.

“Oh, Alex, it’s so good to be home!” Una grabbed my hand and squeezed it warmly. “Thank you for bringing me safely back to Havenwood. Come on, come meet my friends.”

I held onto her hand as I flashed her a wide smile. “Lead the way.”

Then she pulled me away from the waterfall tunnel and toward the beautiful sunny field. We walked through the tall grasses, and I heard giggles at my feet, so I glanced down and saw a bundle of flowers. They looked like marigolds, and they smiled happily up at me with wrinkled faces.

“You brought Una home!” The flowers giggled and swayed. “Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“This way, Alex,” Una said, and she tugged on my hand. “We are almost there.”

The furbae bounced along beside us with a cheerful air, and the sloth person clinging to my chest stayed silent, but there was less tension in its arms. Everyone was relieved to be safe from the nightmare creature, but I was still curious about what Havenwood would be like.

I still didn’t see any signs of civilization.

We walked for a little while longer, and then I spotted a humongous tree. The branches reached for the rainbow-colored sky, and the trunk was as tall as a multi-story building. It reminded me of the giant trees on the west coast big enough to drive a car through, and I remembered my mom lecturing me about the sequoias on a family road trip when I was a kid. As I got closer to the tree, I noticed a face with a serene expression etched in the bark, and I could practically feel the excitement radiating from Una.

This had to be Havenwood.

The cat-girl released my hand to scamper toward the tree, and her tail swished energetically behind her as she trampled through the tall grass. The furbae bounced eagerly after her, and the two laughed as they headed

toward the imposing sequoia. I walked behind her at a leisurely pace, but I was still regaining my stamina after the mad dash across the landscape.

Una led me up to the base of the tree, and then the cat-girl cleared her throat and began to sing.

“We can dance if we want to, we can leave our cares behind,” Una sang. “Because if you can’t dance when you want to, then I don’t care for your mind. Say, we can go where we want to, to a place they’ll never find. We can go where we want to, and leave this world behind.”

The song sounded awfully familiar, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it. Then, as I watched in fascination, a door appeared carved into the bark of the tree. It popped open like a lid, and Una turned to flash me a broad, toothy grin.

“Welcome to Havenwood, Alex the Dreamer,” she said, and she flourished her hands toward the opening in the base of the tree. “After you.”

“Inside the tree?” I shot her a questioning look as I approached the entrance, and I peered inside.

“Yes.” Una nodded. “Look for yourself.”

There was a staircase carved into the hollow of the trunk, and it rose up into the height of the tree out of my eyesight.

Well, she’d been right about one thing.

Havenwood really was well hidden in plain view, but it seemed we were safe now, so I entered the hollow of the tree. Una and the furbae followed behind me, and I started to make my way up the wooden staircase.

I didn't know what laid at the top, but whatever it was would be much better than what was on the other side of the waterfall tunnel. Anything was better than certain death.

I was not prepared for what my eyes saw when I reached the top of the staircase, though, and I gaped at the scene before me for a long moment. Built into the branches of the giant tree was a network of wooden structures and rope walkways. Climbing over rope bridges and walkways were a multitude of animal-like creatures, and they all stopped to wave in a friendly manner when they saw us. Located several stories above the field full of tall grass was a bustling city among the limbs of the sequoia, and there wasn't a scary beast anywhere to be seen.

"Hello, everyone!" Una waved back with enthusiasm.

It seemed as though we'd arrived in Havenwood at last.

Chapter Five

Havenwood was spectacular, and I took a moment to appreciate the view, but my feline companion didn't pause. While I stared around at the surrounding landscape, Una and the furbie thing bounced across the rope bridge attached to the top of the stairwell, and I had little choice but to follow behind them with the sloth-person in tow. I craned my head around trying to see everything all at once, and I almost fell over the side of the rope hand railing.

It reminded me of something from Neverland, or maybe the Jungle Book, but either way, it was incredible, and I couldn't wait to explore every inch of the treehouse city.

"Careful with your feet, Alex," Una warned. "We are not planted with roots in the ground."

"Thanks," I murmured, but I was still too distracted by everything going on around me to pay too much attention to my feet.

Flying through the air were several schools of birds, but they separated in a flurry of wings and flew toward different structures built into the limbs once they approached the tree-city. I saw tiny mushrooms running around with baskets in their hands, but they all had the curves of a woman despite being walking fungi. Squirrels with feminine human faces

scampered past me, and they muttered ‘excuse me’ before they dashed ahead of us.

The voices I heard so far all sounded female, and I remembered what Una had said about most of the men going off to war long ago. I was surrounded by women, it seemed, and I glanced down at the sloth-person curiously. I hadn’t really taken the time to get a good look at my new friends, so I flashed the sloth-person a friendly smile.

“I’m Alex, by the way,” I said. “What’s your name?”

The sloth-person slowly blinked its large eyes at me, and its eyelashes fluttered like they were moving in slow motion. “Some... call... me... Lena.”

“Nice to meet you, Lena,” I said. “I’m glad we ran into each other when we did.”

“Me... too...” Lena formed each word with painfully slow movements. “I... was... almost... night... mare... bait.”

“Are you... Are you a sloth?” I didn’t want to assume its species or gender, but there was no mistaking the feminine quality to Lena’s voice, and the similarities to the slow-moving animal from Earth was hard to ignore.

“Yes... and... no...” Lena answered.

While her answer left me with more questions, I wasn't sure if I had the patience or the time to give her my full attention. Now that we were safe, though, I was sure I'd be able to get all the information I needed from my new friends.

Like whether or not I was dreaming or tripping.

Una led me to a squat, wooden walled building with light shining out the windows and open doorway. I could hear music coming from inside, and I smelled something delicious. A lavishly dressed older lady brushed past us and entered the structure, and she was wearing a teal-and-purple breasted coat.

"This is the meeting place," Una explained as she beckoned me inside. "I will take you to my dwelling later, but I wanted to give you food first."

"Sounds good to me." I gave her a tired grin. "I'm pretty pooped from running away from the nightmare."

A collective gasp swept through the tree around me, and I turned to see every inhabitant of Havenwood staring at me in shock. Several squirrels flashed each other worried looks before scurrying away, and the birds all took flight at once.

Had I said the wrong thing?

“Yes, we saw a nightmare,” Una said to the crowd of animal-like ladies. “But it didn’t touch any of us.”

“What happens when they touch you?” I asked. “Don’t you just die?”

“It depends.” Una shrugged, and she took a seat at one of the tables. “Everything they touch begins to wither and die, but sometimes it happens slowly. The touch is contagious, though, so once you’re infected, everything you touch also starts to wither.”

“That sounds awful.” I shuddered. “I’m glad it never got close to us.”

Una waved her hand above her head, and I could only assume she was signaling to some kind of waitress. Lena slid off my chest to plant herself on the bench beside the beautiful cat-girl, and I suddenly realized the sloth was wearing a bikini. The furbae hopped up onto the table, and it wiggled in my direction, but I had no idea what it meant. Its face consisted of two large eyes nestled above an orange beak, but the long eyelashes definitely had me thinking it was a female.

“I’m sorry,” I said, “I don’t understand.”

“Who are you?” the furbae squeaked out in a high-pitched tone.

“Shouldn’t you have asked that before you hitched a ride on my pants?” I chuckled.

“Life or death, buddy!” the furbae countered. “Answer the question.”

It was hard to believe that a bouncing ball of fur was talking to me, but there we were.

“I’m Alex,” I said with a friendly smile.

“Thank you for saving my life, Alex,” the furbae said. “I am called Ziti because I’m itty bitty.”

“Hi, Ziti,” I chuckled. “Are you from Havenwood?”

The furbae bounced up and down, and I could only assume it was nodding.

Before I could ask another question, a horde of bouncing furbaes flooded the meeting place, and a storm of squeaky voices filled the air. Ziti’s name was chanted over and over again, and the tiny fur ball was hoisted up by the others.

I clapped my hands at the odd sport, but I had to wonder if someone had let some gremlins multiply. These furbae things were a much cuter version, and for that, I was grateful.

“So, Una, did you know Lena and Ziti before they jumped on me?” I asked.

“No.” The beautiful cat-girl raised her eyebrows. “Who are they?”

I gestured to my new friends. “The hitchhikers?”

“What’s that?” Una asked with a curious tilt of her head.

I wasn't about to go down that path again, so I shook my head with a smile. "I'll take that as a no."

Una opened her mouth to reply as her purple eyes crossed, so I knew it was going to be nonsense, but suddenly, a rotund pig-woman appeared at the end of the table and oinked at us. She wore a blue dress and a white apron, but both were smeared with food stains.

"Oh, Miss Maggie!" Una gasped, and her purple eyes filled with joy. "I brought someone to see you!"

The cat-girl proceeded to grab my arm and pull me even closer to her as if she was presenting me to the pig-lady, and I waved awkwardly. Una grinned wide as she bounced up and down with excitement, and she looked at me like I was a prize she'd won at the fair.

"Hi, I'm Alex," I said in a timid voice, and I gave the pig-lady my most charming smile.

I'd never met or even imagined meeting a pig-woman before, so I took a moment to soak in the view. She had curves in more places than I could ever imagine, but she was sweating from every pore, and it made me think of bacon grease. Her tiny pink triangle ears jutted from a blonde curly head of hair, and the snout curling out from her face had its own dusting of

blonde tendrils. The smell radiating from her reminded me of a McDonald's, and I wasn't sure if I loved it or hated it.

I hoped she was a good cook.

"This is the Dreamer, Miss Maggie!" Una insisted, and she swiveled around to squeeze my cheeks like she was pulling a mask off. "He is the one from the prophecy!"

The woman Una called Miss Maggie froze in place, and her eyes widened to an impossible degree. Her snout fell open in surprise, and she staggered backward a couple of steps. Then a look of intense hope flashed across her face, but it was gone an instant later, and a scowl took its place.

"Hogwash," the pig-lady scoffed. "Them tales are just bedtime stories, Una. You know better. After everything you've been through... Did this fancy pants human-looking thing spring you from the Clover Queen's fortress? Is that how he tricked you into thinking he's the Dreamer?"

"No," Una said, and she cast a guilty look down at the table. "They forced potions on me, Mags, but I used it to my advantage. Alex saved me from a Sniffer Snatcher out in the Happy Fields."

"Oh, did he now?" The woman called Miss Maggie scrutinized me closely with her beady black eyes, and her long snout shivered as she sniffed the air around me. She wiped her hands on her apron as she

analyzed me, and I could see her weighing Una's words behind her steely gaze.

"I did," I said, and I cleared my throat. "Miss Maggie, is it? It's lovely to meet you. Any friend of Una's is a friend of mine."

"Where are you from, Alex?" Miss Maggie asked in a cautious tone.

"Earth," I said, and I made sure to meet her gaze confidently.

"How did you get to All-the-land?" The cook released her apron, planted her hands on the table, and leaned forward to look at me even closer.

Despite her stern countenance, I realized she'd referred to this weird dream world by the same name Una had used. Maybe I had been the one confused, after all. It was a strange name, but the residents of this world were even stranger, so who was I to judge?

"I-I don't know," I stammered. "I just woke up here... Well, in what Una calls the Happy Fields. Why are they called that, by the way?"

I shot Una a questioning look, but she shrugged, so I turned back to Miss Maggie.

"That's a long story," the pig-lady sighed, and her shoulders slumped as her voice became a dry monotone. "All-the-land was founded many, many years ago..."

“Does it have to start there?” I asked. “Just tell me about Happy Fields, if you don’t mind.”

What was with everyone wanting to tell me the entire history of the realm right off the bat?

“Very well,” Miss Maggie said with disappointment written across her face, but she tapped her snout with a short finger as she thought it over. After a few moments passed, she snapped her fingers, and a smile actually stretched across her face as she turned back to me. “During the Great Turmoil, a great many men went out to face the Dark King. They drank all the potions we had on hand, even combining multiple potions to create new effects.”

“That actually sounds really cool,” I pointed out, and I thought about what that would mean for me if what Una said was true.

Was I really immune to the negative side effects the rest of the people here were vulnerable to?

“The end result was catastrophic,” Miss Maggie continued with a stern look. “The Dark King’s forces were stronger, and a lot of lives were lost, but during the conflict, the Dark King’s sorcerers spells left a residual haze over the battleground. Anyone who lingers will eventually succumb to the life of a laughing flower.”

“The smiling trees are also soldiers who were turned during the fight,” Una reminded me. “It’s a terrible tragedy.”

The irony of a place named the Happy Fields being the location of a horrendous battle was not lost on me, but it made me wonder yet again how I had come to wake up there.

Had someone done this to me?

I quickly dismissed the idea since the last thing I remembered was eating mushrooms with a hot delivery girl in my apartment, so the likelihood I was tripping was gaining ground. However, the theory didn’t explain all the weirdness I could never have imagined, even in a hallucination.

For example, the talking animal-like people I was surrounded by. They didn’t seem to represent anyone I knew on Earth, and they were more realistic than any dream I’d ever had. If it was just Una, sure, I’d believe my brain could come up with a hot cat babe, but as far as the rest of it went, there was no way in hell I could have made it up if I tried.

“Stay... Away... From... Happy... Fields,” Lena murmured in a warning tone. “Laughing... is... only--”

“No one has time for your nonsense, Lena,” Miss Maggie snorted.

“I do,” I said with a wide smile, and I turned to the sloth to let her finish. “Go on.”

“Laughing... is... only... good... for... so... long,” Lena inched out, but her eyes were bright with gratitude for every moment of her incredibly slow speech.

“True,” I said as I flashed her a wink, but then a thought struck me. “What about the flowers we met inside the waterfall tunnel? Was there a battle there, too?”

“Those flowers were relatives to the citizens of Havenwood,” Miss Maggie explained in a patient tone. “They were replanted close to their home long ago.”

“It seems like everything around here happened long ago,” I mused. “How long has it been since the Dark King arrived in All-the-land?”

“Many, many years,” Miss Maggie said with a solemn wiggle of her pig ears.

“Before I was fully grown,” Una explained.

“Well, how old are you?” I asked.

“A great many years old,” the cat-girl replied cryptically.

“Alex is the Dreamer?” Ziti squeaked in the highest pitch yet, and she practically vibrated with excitement. “Does that mean he will heal all

the sick?”

“I don’t know how he will save us,” Una said with a confused shake of her head, but then her eyes locked onto my face, and her lavender gaze filled with adoration. “But I know it will be fantastic!”

“The prophecy says the Dreamer will be immune to the negative side effects of the potion,” Miss Maggie argued, and she crossed her arms across her broad chest as she snorted in amusement. “There’s no way you found some male who isn’t vulnerable to the opposition effect.”

“Alex is!” Una insisted, and she bounced up and down on the bench as her tail swayed wildly behind her.

“Is that what’s wrong with your speech, Lena?” I asked the sloth-lady. “Or were you born like this?”

I hoped it wasn’t a rude question, but I figured everyone would understand I was new to the area and give me a break. At least my social discrepancies were few and far between, but I was entirely aware of the tattered remains of my clothes as they hung from my form. I was basically half-naked in a room full of women, but they didn’t seem to mind.

“Yes...” Lena nodded slowly. “I... took... a... fast--”

“Potion, a fast potion,” Ziti finished for her. “I assumed as much!”

“What about you, Ziti?” I asked. “Are you suffering from this opposition effect?”

“No!” Ziti giggled. “I have always been this cute.”

“You are awfully adorable,” I agreed.

“The Dark King’s minions hunt me down all the same,” the furbae complained in a high-pitched voice. “No one is safe.”

“What does he want from a furbae?” I asked. “This Dark King? What could he gain from arresting a ball of fur?”

“Besides ultimate dominion over all living things?” Miss Maggie snorted again.

“Women,” Una murmured, and her chin quivered. “He takes all the women his terrifying minions can get their hands on.”

“Why?” I glanced around at all my new friends, but I could already tell there wasn’t a clear answer.

“Why does any man do anything?” Miss Maggie huffed.

“Why does a woman?” I countered as I cast the pig-cook-lady a sideways glance, but she merely shrugged.

There was a tension in the air, and it radiated from the pig-lady like fumes from a stinky bus exhaust. I never intended to make waves in Una’s hometown, but I didn’t like the way the pig-lady looked at me.

It seemed I had a skeptic on my hands. I'd win her over, though, it was only a matter of time. I could understand how she'd ended up being so hostile toward men after what these women had been through, so I would just need to be patient and prove to everyone I was different. Miss Maggie would realize how awesome I was soon enough, but she obviously held a position of authority in Havenwood, so I'd have to go about it carefully.

"Alex saved me," Una reminded the chef. "The least we can do is feed him and get him some fresh clothes."

"Fine," Miss Maggie sighed. "I'll bring out the specials."

"What's the specials?" I asked, but Una shrugged.

"It could be anything you want it to be," the cat-girl said. "What is your favorite food, Alex?"

I thought this over for a moment, because her intense purple eyes said this was a serious question. Pizza and wings had been my go-to ever since I'd moved to Denver, but I wasn't sure if they were my favorite. The spaghetti and meatballs we'd harvested from the noodle tree had been delicious, but I knew I could do better than that.

"Well," I said. "I grew up in the south, so a good old-fashioned fried chicken is probably the easiest answer. The weirdest thing I could picture, though? Lobster thermidor!"

I crossed my arms and nodded like a genie, and Una giggled with delight.

“I’ve never heard of this before,” she said, and she bounced up and down on the bench. “I would love to try it.”

“What’s your favorite food, Una?” I asked with an encouraging smile.

“Fish!” The cat-girl grinned extra wide.

We discussed different food dishes, and I made sure to give Lena and Ziti their turns to chime in as well. A short while later, Miss Maggie returned with two plates in her hands, and she placed the dishes before Una and me.

Mine was lobster thermidor.

Plump, cooked lobster shells lined a silver platter served with greens and lemon slices, and a small dish on the side held a creamy sauce.

“Wait, how did that happen?” I asked, and I glanced at Una’s plate full of rainbow trout. “Is it... Magic?”

“What’s magic?” The cat-girl tilted her head to the side mid-bite, and the tail of a fish dangled from the corner of her mouth. “Is it something you have or something you are? Are you magic, Alex? Is that how you are going to save All-the-land?”

I had to hand it to her, she could sure take a question and run with it.

“I don’t think so?” I said. “But who knows.”

“I do,” Una breathed, and her purple eyes filled with hearts as she gazed up at me with a mouth full of fish.

“I’m starting to think you may be onto something,” I chuckled and flashed her a wink.

“Alex can’t be the Dreamer,” Miss Maggie interjected with an adamant shake of her head as she returned to the table. “He isn’t immune to the potions!”

“Alex is!” Una repeated. “He drank a ‘big’ potion, but then he stayed normal when it wore off! I am telling you the truth, Miss Maggie!”

“I’d have to see it for myself,” the pig-lady argued. “How many more potions do you have, Una?”

“None,” the cat-girl sighed.

“And your mission?” Miss Maggie placed her hands on her hips as she scrutinized the squirming cat-girl. “I don’t see Livia with you, so I assumed you failed again.”

“I couldn’t save Livia.” Una looked dejected, but she maintained eye contact with the imposing chef and kept her chin raised. “But I got the recipe!”

The pig-lady seemed to be an authority figure for my adorable feline companion, but I didn't like her attitude. It almost made me want to drink another potion just to prove her wrong.

"What else does the legend say about the Dreamer?" I asked, and I glanced around at all my new friends. "Maybe there's a test or something I can take."

I was finally ready to confront the issue of being this prophesied savior, thanks to the skepticism of the pig-lady.

One way or another, we would all find out soon.

"The Dreamer will come, and his very presence will shake up the system of power," Miss Maggie said, and what I could only assume was a pig's tail wiggled the back of her dress. "He will be able to fight through the minions with the unleashed power of the potions."

"The Dark King knows this," Ziti squeaked as she bounced up and down. "Which is why he outlawed the making of mixtures altogether. Anyone who could help the Dreamer is arrested for treason upon mere suspicion."

"Most importantly," Una interjected. "The Dreamer is a stranger to All-the-land, and you're the first stranger I've ever known."

“If you know him,” Miss Maggie pointed out. “Then he isn’t a stranger.”

“Is too,” Una argued with a stubborn jut of her chin.

I admired her tenacity in sticking up for me, but there had to be an easier way to decipher whether or not I was this savior she continued to insist I was.

“So, the Dreamer is supposed to be able to stop the nightmare creatures?” I asked, and I thought about how my only defense had been to run as fast as I could in the other direction when faced with that black-hooded monstrosity.

“It is unclear how the Dreamer will save All-the-land,” Una said. “We will follow your lead, Alex.”

I let out my breath in a low exhale, and I turned to my lobster thermidor. I didn’t know what to tell the beautiful cat-girl, but I honestly didn’t think I was the savior she thought I was, so the best choice I had in the moment was to focus on my food.

I cracked open the shell, and steam escaped, so I inhaled the buttery aroma. I dug in with a voracious appetite until I’d cleaned the plate, and I thought about my new friends’ plight as I ate. There weren’t a lot of options for the women who’d managed to survive the plague of the Dark King and

his Deck of Cards, but I wasn't sure how I was supposed to help them. I wasn't the biggest or the strongest human, or even the smartest. I excelled at being average, but I felt a sense of determination growing in my gut.

I would do whatever I could to help the people of Havenwood.

A few moments later, the others finished their food as well, and everyone pushed back their empty plates with satisfied sighs.

"It is good to be home," Una said.

"It was nice to meet the two of you," Ziti squeaked, and she bounced away from the table.

"Dinner... was... lovely," Lena murmured as a twig dangled from the corner of her lips.

"I want to experiment with the specials now," I said. "But I'm too stuffed to eat another bite."

I patted my bulging full stomach for emphasis, and my feline companion giggled.

"I see more hair on your belly," Una said as she pointed a finger toward my exposed chest. The buttons of my shirt had popped off when I'd transformed into a giant, so my chest hair was visible.

If she liked that hair, she'd love to see me naked.

“I finished getting your room ready,” Miss Maggie announced as she approached the table once more.

I was grateful for the distraction. The cat-girl’s inspection of my body hair was a little awkward, and I’d almost explained to her where I had the most curls.

“Thank you,” I said. “Any chance you have some clothes I could wear?”

Miss Maggie inspected my clothes closely, and she gestured for me to hold out my arms. It was like she was measuring me with her eyes, and at long last, she nodded in satisfaction.

“Yes, I have some clothes that will fit you.” Miss Maggie grabbed the empty plates from the table and stacked them up on her arm. “I’ll bring them to the rain house.”

“Rain house?” I asked with a lifted eyebrow.

“Oh, you will love it!” Una gushed. “You pull a string, and it rains inside!”

“Like a shower?” I asked.

“You can do that, too.” Una cocked her head, and her cat ears swiveled like periscopes. “You can also set it to downpour. But not a storm.”

A shower sounded perfect after I'd been trampling through the woods all day, and I followed eagerly behind Miss Maggie and Una. I waved goodbye to Lena over my shoulder as we left the dining hall, and the sloth-lady smiled slowly in farewell.

Then the two women led me around the maze of rope bridges and pathways through the branches until we arrived at a square structure nestled into the leaves. Part of the tree grew up through the middle of the floor, and a hole was carved in the planks to accommodate for its growth. The only other thing in the room were two low benches along either wall, and a long wooden handle attached to a rope which hung from a hole in the ceiling. As I gazed at the ceiling, I noticed the bamboo shoots running from the roof to a spot among the branches of the limb occupying the center of the room.

It was pretty ingenious the way they'd harnessed the power of nature to make a somewhat modern shower, and I was eager to try it out, so I turned to the two ladies with a broad smile.

"It looks great. Do you have any towels?" I asked.

"I will return shortly with clean clothes and fresh linens," Miss Maggie explained.

"Cool." I grinned, and I rolled onto the balls of my feet as I waited for the two women to leave.

“Oh, apologies,” Una murmured as a blush darkened her cheeks. “I have gotten used to being with you, Alex. It is strange to say goodbye.”

“Come find me later?” I requested with a soft smile.

“Absolutely.” Her entire face brightened, and she nodded emphatically. “Enjoy the rain house!”

Then Una and Miss Maggie left me alone in the bathroom. I stripped off my ruined clothes and tossed them in a pile before I pulled on the wooden rope handle, but then warm water gushed from a spigot above my head. I even found a bar of soap wrapped in a huge green leaf nestled among the branch, and I worked up a thick lather before I scrubbed my entire body.

The sensation of the surprisingly warm liquid washing over me felt amazing, and I was lost in bliss for several moments, but after a while, my thoughts began to wander over everything I’d experienced in this dream so far.

I’d woken up in what was basically a cemetery only to hear a cry for help, and when I’d rushed to save the damsel in distress, I’d found a half-cat absurdity fighting an even odder half-dog, half-lizard creature. I was lucky Una had dropped the ‘big’ potion since I had no idea how I would have fought off the Sniffer Snatcher otherwise, but that was neither here nor

there. I was safe now, but I was in a strange treetop city full of half-animal, half-people creatures, and they wanted me to save them from certain doom.

How was I going to do that?

I half-wanted to wake up, and I half-wanted to run around this crazy dream world exploring everything, but I was torn between the two. It didn't seem like this dream was ending any time soon, so I might as well lean in to it.

I finished cleaning myself off, and I pulled the handle again to turn the stream of water off once more. Just as I was flicking water from my extremities, I heard a knock at the door, and I crossed to the portal in a couple of steps.

It was probably Miss Maggie with my clean clothes.

I pulled open the door to reveal Una standing before me with a pile of neatly folded clothes in her arms. Her gaze traveled down my naked body, and her purple eyes widened when they took in my complete form. Then her face returned to mine, and her tongue darted out to moisten her lips.

"I-I brought g-garments," the stunned cat-girl stammered out, and she shoved her armful of fabric into my arms. "Y-You don't have to wear them if you don't want to."

"I'll consider all my options." I smirked. "Thank you, Una."

“Y-You’re welcome.” The cat-girl dipped her head, and her striped ears twitched.

I closed the door again, and I looked down at my hard cock with a wry grin. I’d really enjoyed the shower, but Una’s reaction to me was the icing on the cake.

Then I turned my attention to the bundle of clothes I’d been gifted, and I inspected them quickly before I started to get dressed. I pulled on the baggy cream-colored pants with a sigh of relief. They were cinched around the ankles and the waist, but the fabric billowed around the legs, and they hung comfortably from my hips.

The shirt was basically just a vest that hung almost to my knees, and it was a soft green hue that complimented the pants nicely. A wide belt completed the ensemble, and I used it to hold the shirt-vest closed across my chest. A spattering of chest hair was still visible around the neckline, though, so I knew Una would be pleased.

I finished by raking my hands through my shaggy black hair, and then I opened the door once more. Una waited patiently on the edge of the rope bridge, and she stood with her back to me and her tail swaying as she gazed out over the clearing toward the waterfall.

“Havenwood sure is a beautiful place,” I said as I came up behind her.

“Oh, yes,” Una gasped as she spun around, and she couldn’t hide the flash of disappointment in her eyes when she saw me fully dressed.

“Havenwood is very special.”

“You’re even more special,” I said in a soft voice, and I took her hand gently in my own. “I’m glad I dreamed you up, Una.”

“You made me?” The cat-girl tilted her head to the side, but she didn’t move to take her hand back. “I was told a different tale.”

“Oh, yeah?” I chuckled.

“Indeed.” Una nodded, but then her violet eyes turned earnest. “How do you feel, Alex of Earth?”

“Much better,” I sighed. “That rain house is magic.”

“So that is what magic is.” Una’s face brightened.

“Sometimes,” I allowed with a shrug, but then I turned my eyes out to the view. “Care to show me around a little?”

I really didn’t want the dream to end before I got to know the beautiful cat-girl in the best way, but even in my wildest dream, I had a hard time just announcing that I wanted to fuck her. Better to go the gentlemanly route and know for sure she was open to it first.

“I would care to do so,” Una replied. “It would bring me strong feelings of joy.”

“Good.” I grinned. “After you, beautiful.”

“I am Una, remember?” she giggled.

“Beautiful means cute, adorable, or pretty,” I explained. “To me, you are better than all the flowers in All-the-land.”

“Flowers cannot accomplish much so rooted in one place,” Una pointed out. “I am not known for sitting still.”

“I’ve noticed,” I chuckled.

The cat-girl smiled a wide, toothy grin, and she squeezed my hand warmly. “I will show you Havenwood, but you must watch your step. I almost fell on the way to the rain house.”

“I’m not the one suffering from agility opposition,” I said with a raised eyebrow. “But I’ll be careful, and I’ll try to catch you, too.”

“This way,” Una said, and she pulled me down the rope bridge.

We spent the next few hours exploring Havenwood hand-in-hand, but I was much more interested in giving Una sideways, flirty glances. We traversed the rope bridges and climbed the many ladders to see the sights. The branches reached into the air, and everywhere I looked was a little hut or structure of some kind.

We met several animal-like people, and Una waved in a friendly manner to each one, but I didn't catch their names as she called them out. There were a variety of bird-people of every color flying through the air as we watched the sunset from the topmost bridge in town. The brilliant orb illuminated the rainbow sky with bright streaks of light, and I sighed with contentment.

It was a perfect end to a long day.

"I have one more thing to show you before we retire," Una said, and she took my hand once more. "We've been to the upmost of the top, but now we will go to the downmost of the bottom."

I wasn't sure what she meant, but I was happy to follow along wherever she would lead me, and I flashed her a cheeky grin as we walked toward the center trunk of the massive tree.

"Thank you for today," I said.

"The day has yet to end," the cat-girl pointed out. "Come, down to the bottom."

Then she led me into the stairwell of the tree trunk, and we climbed down to where the hidden doorway opened to the clearing below Havenwood. Una kept going downward, though, and suddenly, stairs appeared below her feet. She walked purposefully down the steps, and I

followed along, but I cast an anxious glance at the glimmer of light above me before it disappeared from view.

“Where are we going?” I asked in a curious tone as I looked around the dark stairwell.

“Down,” Una said simply.

“Obviously,” I snorted. “What’s at the bottom?”

“Sadness.” I couldn’t see Una’s face in the growing darkness, but I could hear the solemn tone of her voice.

“Oh,” was all I could say.

We walked down a few more steps, and then we came to a halt. Una opened a door, and the landing was bathed in light, so I had to blink away the temporary blindness before I could peer inside the room. When I managed to refocus my gaze, I saw rows and rows of beds divided by sheets of fabric. Laying on the beds were men, and even from the doorway, I could tell they were all in bad shape.

Una pranced inside, and she tossed a sad smile over her shoulder at me. I returned the expression as I followed behind her, and I pushed the portal closed behind me. The feeling of sickness overwhelmed the space, and a part of me wanted to bolt for the door, but I kept my feet planted firmly in place. The air smelled of antiseptic and an earthy aroma I could

only assume came from being so far underground. This room had to be nestled among the roots of the giant sequoia Havenwood was built into, and I glanced tentatively up at the ceiling. Sure enough, it was raw dirt, and white roots poked out at various intervals.

“This way, Alex,” Una urged, and she took my hand as she pulled me past the rows of beds.

Moans of pain and whimpers filled my ears as I passed by the injured and sick, and my stomach twisted with sympathy. I nodded at those who I made eye contact with as I followed the cat-girl, but I only received a few nods in return. The lack of polite greetings didn’t bother me, though, since I’d hate to be stuck in some hospital bed while the world was being conquered by an ominous Dark King.

Were these men suffering from potion withdrawals?

Una led me all the way to the back of the room and up to a woman with long gray-streaked brown hair standing with her back to us. The woman was wearing a long white tunic with a gold-colored belt cinched around her waist, and her feet were adorned with rope sandals.

My feline companion tapped the woman on the shoulder, and the brown-and-gray-haired lady spun around with a frown of concentration still furrowing her eyebrows, but her face brightened when she saw Una

standing before her. She looked like a normal human except for the mouse ears twitching atop her head, and the tiny pointy nose definitely reminded me of a mouse. Her eyes were the color of hazelnuts, and the wrinkles around them indicated her age. She looked like she was in her mid-fifties, but it was hard to judge off first glances alone.

“Doctor Kria,” the cat-girl greeted with a dip of her head. “I have brought someone to meet you. This is Alex.”

“Oh, Una! You made it home safe!” Doctor Kria rushed forward to seize the cat-girl in a hug, and the feline beauty wore a gentle smile as she patted the doctor’s hair softly. “I’m so glad to see you!”

When the doctor finally released her, Una beckoned me forward, and I plastered a friendly smile on my face as I stuck out my hand to shake the doctor’s.

“It’s nice to meet you,” I said, and then my smile turned sympathetic. “I didn’t realize there were so many sick and injured people in Havenwood. Are you the only person taking care of them? It must take a lot of energy to give so much of yourself.”

Doctor Kria blinked down at my offered hand with a confused expression, and then her gaze returned to Una. “I’ve told you, Una, this is a place of healing. You can’t play down here right now.”

“No play will take place,” Una assured the doctor. “I wanted to introduce you to the Dreamer.”

“The Dreamer?” Doctor’s Kria’s hazelnut eyes widened, and her gaze returned to my face. “Impossible.”

“Many things are impossible,” Una said. “But this is not one of them! I saw him with my own eyes. He is here to save us, Doctor Kria!”

“Hmm.” The doctor tapped a petite finger against her dainty lips as she narrowed her eyes at me. “Could it be true?”

Doctor Kria let the question hang in the air for a long moment, but I didn’t try to argue my case. I had a feeling a long-winded explanation would only make me look like I was trying too hard. If I really was the Dreamer everyone kept talking about, then it would be known for sure soon enough.

“It’s true!” Una insisted with an enthusiastic nod. “I came to ask if you had any potions. Alex is immune to the opposition! I want to show everyone he is the Dreamer.”

“I have none.” Doctor Kria frowned. “How was your mission? Did you manage to steal any potions with the recipe?”

“Alex drank it,” Una sighed. “But that’s how I know he is the Dreamer. He saved me from a Sniffer Snatcher and a nightmare. He’s

amazing, Doctor Kria, I am eager for you to agree.”

“I will agree with what I can see,” the doctor replied cryptically.

“Unfortunately, until we have another potion, we will never know, but the important thing is you are safe, Una.”

“That holds the least of the importance among the things,” Una argued, and she planted her hands on her hips.

I had to chuckle at her level of sass, but that earned me a swift glare from the doctor, so I cleared my throat and looked awkwardly down at the wooden planks of the floor.

“I apologize, Una,” Doctor Kria said in a soft voice. “I don’t have any potions for you. Even if I did have some, I’d have to use it sparingly for my own research purposes. We can’t waste any with experimenting on some strange male.”

“Alex is from Earth,” Una informed her in a proud tone, and she lifted her chin at a stubborn angle. “He is not just a stranger to us, but to all of All-the-land. He is immune to the opposition, and he saved me. You’ll see. He is the Dreamer, and I can prove it.”

I wondered why this meant so much to the cat-girl, but then again, if my entire world was in danger, and I thought one man could fix it, I’d never let him out of my sight until he completed the task. I couldn’t blame the cat-

girl for her eagerness to save All-the-land any more than I could blame myself for not being able to wake up from this crazy dream.

The illusion or dream or whatever it was had started to feel more and more realistic by the minute, and a nagging doubt over what reality really was hovered at the edge of my mind.

I didn't want to voice these thoughts out loud for fear of sounding insane, so I pushed them away and refocused on the conversation between the cat-girl and the doctor.

"We'll have to launch another mission," Doctor Kria said.

"Alex and I will go," Una volunteered immediately.

"Whoa, where are we going?" I asked. "I haven't agreed to go anywhere just yet."

"The destination is still unknown." Una shrugged. "But we simply must get our hands on another potion! I'll ask around for some ideas. Alex, are you feeling prepared for rest?"

"I could rest." I smirked, and then I nodded to the doctor. "It was nice to meet you, ma'am."

"We shall see if the same is true for you," the skeptical doctor said, but a small smile tugged at the corners of her petite lips all the same. "We will reconvene once we have some ideas."

The sun had completely set by the time we returned to the branch city hundreds of feet above the ground. Una led me to a circular domed structure, and she gestured for me to go inside.

“This will be your lodgings while you’re in Havenwood,” the cat-girl explained. “My dwelling is nearby, close enough for me to hear if you call my name.”

“Thanks,” I said with a grateful smile, but I stayed frozen in place outside the doorway.

Una tilted her head to the side with a silent question in her eyes, but her confusion was the only prompting I needed. It wasn’t the right time to invite her inside, but I was seriously going to regret my choice if I woke up before being able to at least kiss her.

“Goodnight, Una,” I said as I dipped my head beneath the door frame.

“Rest thoroughly, Alex.” The cat-girl grinned impossibly wide, and her teeth sparkled in the starlight. “I will fetch you when the sun rises.”

Inside the dwelling stood a platform bed, a round, clay wood stove, and a small table with two chairs tucked beneath it. The floor was made from wooden planks, and the gaps between them were wide enough for me

to see moonlight through. It was a little unnerving, but I told myself it was just like the treehouse I'd had as a kid.

I stretched out across the low platform bed and yawned. I didn't know what would happen if I fell asleep, but I was exhausted after the long day I'd had of running, growing, fighting, and shrinking. I passed out as soon as my head hit the pillow, and I slept like a log for hours. I didn't know what time it was when I felt a weird weight on my chest, and I blinked open my eyes.

Una straddled my chest and gazed down at me, and the pre-dawn light coming in through the open window illuminated the depths of her purple eyes. My breath caught in my throat as I stared up at the beautiful cat-girl, and I had the urge to stroke her cheek. Fortunately, her legs were holding down my arms, so it was easy to resist the temptation.

"It is dawn," Una informed me. "You were still asleep. That is strange."

"Does everyone in All-the-land wake up at dawn?" I asked.

"How would I know?" Una tilted her head to the side. "I have not met everyone."

"Okay, so do the people you know all wake up at dawn?" I chuckled.

“Everyone wakes up when their eyes open,” Una said. “That’s how you know they’re done sleeping.”

“I guess that makes sense,” I conceded. “Care to let me free?”

“I have not imprisoned you here, Alex,” Una assured me, but she didn’t budge from my chest, either.

“I can’t move,” I pointed out as I glanced down at her muscular, striped legs, but she didn’t seem to get the hint.

“Where else would you live?” Una asked in a curious tone. “This dwelling is close to mine, and it was empty. Were you unhappy with your stay last night?”

“No, I meant literally, right now, I can’t move my arms,” I explained with a smirk. “Your legs are pinning me down.”

“Oh,” she said, and she hopped off me in a clumsy tumble of limbs and tail. “Will you get up now?”

“Yes,” I chuckled, and I pushed myself up to a sitting position before I swung my legs over the edge of the bed. “I’m up. What’s going on?”

“In All-the-land or with me? Either way, I suppose it’s the same answer. I’ve been dying of impatience while you slept. I’ve been waiting for so long to tell you about how I was talking to our new friends and some other people I know here in Havenwood.” Una’s words came out in a

jumble as her eyes lit up with excitement. “Several people saw our enemies moving through the woods, but only Lena saw Clover Cards with potions before we ran into the nightmare, and she jumped on you. They were hauling a wagon full of potions! I figured if we hurried we could catch up to them before they made it back to the Clover Queen’s fortress, but we’d have to go at full speed.”

I processed her words as quickly as I could, but when I realized she wanted me to run off after the people who had previously captured and imprisoned her, my stomach twisted into an anxious knot. I took a few deep breaths to steady myself, and the beautiful cat-girl eyed me curiously.

“What will we do once we catch up to them?” I raised one eyebrow and crossed my arms. “I don’t exactly have claws or any weapons to help me fight them. Hell, I’ve never even held a sword before, but I have shot a gun a few times. That would be helpful... Do you have any guns?”

“So, you’ll do it!” Una squealed with delight, and she jumped into my lap as she wrapped her arms around my neck.

I couldn’t tell if that was an affirmation to the gun question or not, but I was quickly distracted by the up-close view I got of the beautiful cat-girl and by the warmth of her body against mine. I felt a reaction stir in my loins, so I hastily placed her on the bed beside me.

“I’ll do my best,” I muttered. “First things first, I’ll need a weapon.”

“Second things secondly,” Una giggled as she bounced up and down on the bed, and it seemed she was completely oblivious to the effect she had on me. “Thank you, Alex.”

“I haven’t done anything yet,” I said. “You can thank me when it’s over, and we have the potions we need.”

“Then everyone will see for themselves that you are the Dreamer,” Una breathed, and her purple eyes filled with intense hope. “And all of All-the-land will be safe from the Dark King’s control.”

“We’ll see,” I said, and I swallowed down the lump that rose in my throat.

Was I really going to help her?

It seemed as though I’d already made up my mind, and I raked a hand through my hair as I wondered if I’d gone absolutely, completely bonkers. Una and the other women weren’t capable of fighting off much, and I was the first able-bodied male they’d seen in a long time

I had to help them.

Maybe then I’d wake up?

Chapter Six

Determination filled my gut, and my steps were brisk as Una and I walked the rope bridges toward the dining hall while the sun illuminated the eastern edge of the rainbow sky. The cat-girl's fluffy tail swished behind her, and her hips swayed from side to side in a hypnotic rhythm. She had no idea how attracted I was to her, but the moment never seemed right to let my feelings be known. Even though this was the craziest dream I'd ever had, I was still hesitant to do anything that would have me cast out of the safe haven or rejected by the beautiful cat-girl.

Still, we were on our way to go on a mission outside of the canopy of the tree, and I had no idea what laid beyond the clearing. I only knew countless ways to die waited for me beyond the safety of Havenwood, and while I wasn't exactly eager to return to them, more potions would certainly come in handy in the future.

"So, what about this weapon situation?" I asked as I followed Una up a rope ladder to the next level of connecting bridges. "Do guns exist in All-the-land?"

"What is a gun?" Una asked as her ears flicked backward.

"Okay, so I'll take that as a no," I sighed, but I wasn't going to let my disappointment get to me. "How about swords? We're going to need

something.”

“I can get you a sword if that is what you need,” Una said, and her ears flicked toward me again. “But my claws serve me well enough.”

“Yeah, you got a few good scratches in against the Sniffer Snatcher,” I said, and the image of the hot cat-girl launching herself from the branches of a tree flashed through my mind.

That wasn’t something I’d ever forget.

Nor would I ever lose the memory of how terrifying the dog-monster had been, or how close we’d both come to being its chew toys.

“I would have done better if they hadn’t made me take a potion,” Una huffed in an angry voice. “The queen and her Clover Cards deserve to be knocked around a little after the way they’ve treated the people of All-the-land.”

“To be completely honest with you,” I said as I raked a hand through my hair, “I’ve never used a sword before.”

“I’m sure it is simple enough to kill things,” Una mused. “All-the-land is full of things that can kill you very easily, after all. Fairness would dictate it being just as easy to kill them.”

“We will see, I guess,” I mumbled with a shake of my head.

I had a feeling killing things was a little bit harder than being killed, but it wasn't an argument I wanted to win, either.

A few moments later, we made it to the dining hall, and a few familiar faces sat at the tables inside. Miss Maggie, Lena, and Ziti sat on one bench with a group of strange animals opposite them, and Doctor Kria sat at another with a bunch of bird-people, but her back was to us.

"I've brought Alex," Una announced in a loud, cheerful voice, and everyone turned to face us with bright smiles. "He has agreed to save us all!"

Cheers erupted around the room, and I saw hope light up their eyes as they applauded my mere presence. Bird calls, squirrel chatter, furbie squeaks, and a loud meow filled the air, and then everyone burst out into uproarious laughter. It seemed the people of Havenwood were elated to have found a savior at last, and apparently, that hero was me.

That was a lot of expectations to pile upon one man, but there I stood with the weight of the world suddenly placed on my shoulders. My palms began to sweat, and the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end.

Uh-oh.

"That's not... exactly what I said," I pointed out. "I agreed to help get some potions. That's it."

Una grinned wide as she waved a dismissive hand. “Thus proving you are the Dreamer of prophecy who will free All-the-land from the Dark King’s rule. If you’re not here to save us, Alex, then what are you doing in All-the-land?”

She had a good point.

What would happen when I drank another potion? What was I going to say to the occupants of the tree city if I actually was this Dreamer they all hoped for? Would I be able to deny them? I didn’t even know where to start. How was I going to take down a Dark King with countless nightmarish minions on his side?

I was one man.

“Uhhh...” I sighed and rubbed the back of my neck, but I flashed Una a sheepish grin. “Let’s just start with the potions, alright?”

“Very well.” Una nodded, but her deep-purple eyes were intense as she held my gaze. “Once you open your eyes and wake up, you will see you have been the Dreamer this entire time. I know in my heart you will save us all.”

Una’s utter faith in me was highly appealing, and it almost made me want to be the Dreamer like she hoped I was just so I could make her happy.

Then the beautiful cat-girl winked at me before she turned back to the others. She led me to the table where Miss Maggie and our new friends sat, but the doctor quickly came over to join us. I was sitting between the furbae and Una and across from the mouse-lady, so I shot the doctor a friendly smile.

Kria blushed and looked down at the table, and she avoided my eyes from then on out.

“Alex needs a sword,” Una said to the table at large.

There was silence for a long moment, and I thought the two older ladies might refuse, so I glanced at Lena and Ziti with a questioning look. I doubted they had access to swords given they wouldn’t be able to use them, so I had little expectation for a reply.

“I have a few in storage,” Miss Maggie said.

“I do as well,” Doctor Kria added with her eyes still downcast. “You could have your pick of any, really.”

“Why do you have so many swords?” I asked.

“Not just swords,” Doctor Kria interjected. “Pretty much any weapon you can imagine. There is quite a variety in my store room given up by my patients.”

“They’re left over from the Great Turmoil,” Miss Maggie explained, and she crossed her arms over her chest as she gave me a hard look.

“Almost every man I knew threw down his weapon and refused to fight. They saw what happened to the men who went before them and decided to bail on All-the-land, but it works out in your favor. There are plenty of weapons for you to choose from if you’re actually willing to fight.”

A huge stash of weapons could prove useful, and I pictured myself fighting with different kinds. A sword was pretty basic, but how it was used highly depended on the type of blade and the skill level of the user. Daggers were cool, but could be useless against larger enemies. Maces certainly made a dent in armor, but I would probably need more muscle definition before I could wield one. The same was true for warhammers, double headed axes, and flails.

“A sword will do for now,” I said with a polite dip of my head. “I’d like to look over all your weapons at another time, if that’s alright?”

“I will fetch a sword,” Miss Maggie stated in a monotone voice, and she turned to leave but then paused. “Do you need armor, too?”

“Uh, yeah, if you have some,” I said, and excitement began to lift my chest. “That would be awesome. Thank you.”

“Hmmpf,” the pig-lady huffed, but the tension in her shoulders softened as she departed. “We will see if it will even fit.”

I’d win her over eventually, but in the meantime, I could be patient with the stubborn sow.

I drummed my fingers on the wooden table as I waited for her to return, and my stomach began to growl insistently, but a short while later, a small pig-girl trotted out of the kitchen with arms loaded with plates. She bowed her head politely as she laid them before us, and I turned a questioning eye to Una.

“I didn’t order anything,” I said.

“The kitchen knows when you’re hungry,” the pig-girl squeaked.

She couldn’t have been older than ten, and she had a sprig of blonde hair between two pink triangle ears. She was maybe three feet in height, and her head barely peeked over the table. The girl’s outfit matched Miss Maggie’s, and I could only assume they were mother and daughter.

I pulled open my dish’s lid to reveal biscuits and gravy, strips of crunchy bacon, and over-easy eggs. It seemed the urgency of our mission had plateaued in lieu of breakfast being eaten, but I wasn’t going to complain. A good, hearty meal was necessary before going out to fight unknown enemies. Besides, I would need armor and a weapon if I was

going to be attacking anything, so I might as well kill some time with food while I waited for Miss Maggie to return.

I listened to the chatter of the dining hall while I ate, and the people of Havenwood kept saying things about Clovers and cards, but I didn't know what that meant exactly. If there was an animated deck of cards walking around this fantasy land, I was going to die laughing. I'd truly be in some Alice in Wonderland nonsense then. Still, it could be anything, so I tried not to get my hopes up, but I was sitting between a ball of fur and a half-cat, half-girl hottie.

Anything was possible.

I shook my head in awe at my current situation, and then I returned my focus back to my food. There was a dusting of salt and pepper over the top, and it appeared to be the perfect amount, but I took a tentative scoop of gravy just to be sure. The savory richness hit my tongue like an avalanche of flavor, and I moaned against my will.

It was perfect.

I stuffed my face with awesome food, and I glanced sideways at my companions to see them doing the same thing to their meals, but their dishes looked far less appetizing. Una had another plate of fish, but these were more like the kind found in koi ponds. Ziti nibbled on some crumbs

that resembled chicken feed, and Lena munched on some leaves. Doctor Kria snacked on a more sensible dish of olives and meatballs, but then Miss Maggie returned with an armful of gear just as I was licking my plate clean. The pig-chef set down her stuff on a nearby table before she sat on the other side of the bench.

“Are you sure you want to do this, Una?” Miss Maggie asked. “You should be downstairs in bed after everything the Clover Cards put you through.”

“I’m okay,” the cat-girl insisted with a firm nod. “I don’t want Alex to go alone.”

I had to agree. A clumsy cat-girl was better than nothing. Plus, my other options were a ball of fur, a sloth, a mousey lady, or a pig-chef. On top of being the most useful of the bunch, Una was my favorite to spend time with, so I was glad she was coming with me.

“I wouldn’t know where to go otherwise,” I pointed out. “I’m unfamiliar with this land.”

“You could be charading for all I know,” the pig-lady huffed. “I am merely concerned about my friend’s safety.”

“As you should be.” I nodded. “I promise you, I will keep her safe.”

“That is a big promise here in All-the-land,” Doctor Kria pointed out, and she wrung her hands together anxiously. “There are a great many ways to die here.”

“I’m aware,” I chuckled. “But don’t worry. I will do everything I can.”

“Maybe we should go as well, Doctor,” Miss Maggie murmured, and she shot the mouse-lady a questioning look.

“That is not a bad thought,” Doctor Kria replied with a thoughtful tap of her fingers against her chin. “It has been a while since I have left the tree.”

“I’m safe with Alex,” Una assured her overprotective mother figures.

The three women began to argue amongst themselves about who was going on this mission, and I could tell Una wanted it to be just the two of us, but I still hoped we would have some backup as well.

“Everyone can come,” I said, and I pushed myself to my feet. “Now, I’m going to go try on this stuff. Come grab me when everyone is ready to go get the potions.”

Then I crossed over to the pile Miss Maggie had laid down, and I began to inspect it. There were two swords to choose from and several pieces of leather armor, but not a complete set. After I laid everything out

like a puzzle, I realized some of the pieces were different sizes. I didn't know if it would fit me, but it was better than nothing, so I scooped it all up and made my way back to my dwelling where I would have more space to spread out.

Once I'd made it to the little wooden hut I now occupied, I pulled on the leather armor bit by bit, but there were several pieces that wouldn't work for me, so I discarded them to the side. Then I stood in the center of the room with a shoulder guard, leather chest covering, cuisses, and leather boots. Combined with the flowy tunic vest and billowy pants, I looked like a combination of cowboy and Bollywood dancer.

I attempted a few stretches, and my movements were unrestrained by the armor, so I was pleased. Then I picked up one of the swords and gripped it tentatively. I'd never held a sword before, in real life or in a dream, and the weight of it shocked me. It was like the weapon was really made of metal and not just a figment of my imagination.

There were two swords to choose from, but other than the metal appearing splotched with rust and the edges dented from use, they looked completely different from each other. One was a curved blade like a pirate would use, and the other was shorter and wider across the blade. Both had leather wrapped around their grips, but the curved sword had a red tassel at

the end of the pommel. The short broad sword was heavier, and a little more awkward to maneuver, so I opted for the lighter of the two.

I gripped the curved sword by the hilt in my right hand, and I twirled it around like I'd seen in movies and video games, but the blade suddenly launched from my hand to penetrate the wooden wall of my dwelling.

"Oh, shit," I gasped as I hurried over to fetch my sword from the wall.

I had to yank with my foot braced against the base of the wall in order to free my weapon, and I shook my head in awe at my luck. I could have easily injured myself or someone else like that.

I decided my room was a bit too cramped to be practicing in, and I headed down to the clearing at the base of the giant sequoia. Once I arrived at the foot of the tree, I went about practicing with my new sword some more. I swung it around and attempted some fancy footwork, but I wasn't sure how my moves would hold up in an actual battle.

I swung my sword in wide arches, flicked it in my wrist, and accustomed myself to the weight and feel of it in my hand. I wasn't sure how much time I spent practicing, but the sun still hadn't risen above the eastern edge of the sky, so I continued for a while longer.

Once I was successfully amped up to go confront the clover cards, I returned to the treetop city, but Una practically ran into me on my way up the stairs. Her purple eyes were full of excitement and a twinge of fear, so I stuck out a hand to steady her and gave her an encouraging smile.

“Are we ready to go?” I asked.

“Yes, we are,” Doctor Kria said from behind the cat-girl.

I peered over Una’s shoulder to see the doctor and the chef standing on the stairwell, and I encompassed them in my grin.

“Good.” I nodded. “Which way do we go?”

“Down, for starters,” Miss Maggie snorted. “But you’re standing in our way.”

“No need to be rude,” I muttered under my breath as I turned around and began to trot down the steps.

The three women followed closely behind me, and a moment later, we were standing in the clearing at the base of the tree. I headed toward the waterfall, but then I heard Una clear her throat behind me, and I turned to see the women walking in the other direction.

“You’re going backward.” The cat-girl gave me a confused look as she tilted her head to the side, and she beckoned for me to hurry up.

“It’s going to be a long day,” I sighed, and I hurried to catch up to them.

Una smiled as I joined them, and she slipped her hand into mine. “We are taking a shortcut.”

“You three know the area better than I do,” I said. “I’m happy to follow.”

Una nodded knowingly, but then her eyes turned thoughtful, and she bit her lip as she gazed at the ground ahead of us. I was curious about what was on her mind, but I didn’t want to press her too much.

“We will need you to lead us soon enough,” Una said after a while of walking in silence, and her ears flicked around in every direction. “You will be King of All-the-land after you defeat the darkness plaguing us. Everyone will sing your praises, and the streets will be alive with celebration.”

A distant sound made Una flinch, and she fell silent once more. Her palm was warm, borderline sweaty, in my hand, and she held onto me tightly like I would disappear if she let me go. She was much more tense than she’d been up in the branches of Havenwood, but that was understandable.

Even in the hidden clearing, there could be danger lurking.

Then the four of us hiked across the field of tall grass toward the shadows cast by a tree line full of imposing evergreens. Una stumbled every couple of steps, but since I was holding her hand, it was easy enough to help her regain her balance. I cast her a sideways smile when I caught her, and a blush crept up her neck.

“My clumsiness is getting worse,” Una explained, and her ears flicked anxiously. “My vision is growing bad as well.”

“The opposition effect?” I asked, but she merely nodded.

As we drew closer to the imposing trees, I realized they weren’t trees at all, but gigantic mushrooms. They were brightly-colored and came in a variety of patterns, but they all had tall white stalks connecting them to the ground. The others didn’t seem as awed by the towering fungi, but I gaped up at them like a kid in a candy store.

We passed beneath the shadows of the mushroom caps, and the air temperature dropped several degrees. Wind whistled through my hair, and I shivered beneath the chill of the breeze. I rubbed my arm with my free hand, and Una shot me a curious glance.

“Do your clothes not protect you?” The cat-girl’s ears flicked in every direction while she talked, and I could tell she was only half-paying attention to me. “What is their purpose?”

“To keep me covered.” I shrugged. “It’s better than being naked, but I wasn’t prepared for the climate to change so quickly.”

“You must be prepared for anything here in All-the-land,” Una warned.

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I replied as I squeezed her hand. “So, where are we going?”

“We are headed toward the Clover fortress,” Doctor Kria said over her shoulder from ahead of me. “Then we will double back and meet the Cards on the road.”

“Sounds simple enough.” I grinned. “What happens when we find them?”

“You will use your sword to retrieve the potions,” Miss Maggie snorted. “If you think you can manage such a task.”

“I think we should have a better plan than that,” I said in a cautious voice. “While I’d love to jump in and kill them all with my sword, this is the first time I’ve ever even held one, so maybe we should think of something else.”

“What do you propose?” The pig-chef swiveled to face me with her hands planted on her hips. “You’re the Dreamer, right? A few Clover Cards shouldn’t cause a problem for you.”

“In theory...” I rubbed the back of my neck. “But we don’t even know how many enemies there will be. How about this? You three cause a distraction which draws the Clover Cards away from the potions, then I run in and grab one. After I’ve drunk one of the magic elixirs, it will be simple to destroy the Cards.”

“As long as you can handle the effects,” Doctor Kria allowed. “Then I have no issues with your plan.”

“I’ll do my best,” I chuckled.

I wasn’t going to let her disbelieving tone get to me, but I did have my doubts about what exactly I was going to do. I’d only been given the sword a short while before, and I wasn’t what you’d call a natural at it, if the wall of my dwelling was any indication, so drinking one of the potions seemed like the best option for success.

Besides, these women were counting on me, so I had no other choice.

We walked through the tall mushroom forest for a while, and the sun barely permeated the thick caps. The light shone in long random slats, but I found myself weaving from one to the other in an effort to combat the chill in the air. Then Miss Maggie held up one hand to signal a stop.

“We are getting closer,” the pig-lady whispered. “We must be very careful from here on out. The Cards Lena spotted may not be the only ones

in this area.”

“We should split up,” Doctor Kria suggested. “We can cover more ground in pairs.”

“The wannabe-Dreamer comes with me,” Miss Maggie replied immediately, and she held up her hand when Una opened her mouth to argue. “You’re suffering from withdrawals, Una, you need to stay close to the doctor just in case. Neither one of you should be out here in the first place, but here we are.”

“Alex would keep me safe,” Una insisted with a stubborn lift of her chin.

“Come with me, dear,” Doctor Kria urged in a gentle tone.
“Otherwise, I’d worry too much about you.”

“Very well,” Una sighed, but her purple eyes flicked back and forth between her two mother figures. “It’s only temporary. We will be back together once we find the Cards.”

“Yes, Una,” Miss Maggie assured the cat-girl. “I’m not going to do anything to your precious Alex.”

“Good.” Una brightened, and she squeezed my hand once more before she released it. “How will we know the others have seen what we are searching for?”

“I will whistle,” Miss Maggie said. “Una, you can meow.”

“I can meow low or loud,” Una said with an eager nod. “Which one should I use?”

“Use your best judgement,” Miss Maggie said, but she gave the cat-girl a warning look. “And stay close to Doctor Kria. The last thing we need is to lose you after we just got you back.”

“Alex is here now,” Una replied. “Nothing bad will happen to me ever again.”

I wished I could guarantee the cat-girl’s words were the truth, but I had no way of knowing for sure what the future held. I just wanted to get the potions and get back to Havenwood, but I had to admit, I was glad I was paired up with Miss Maggie. This would give me a chance to get to know the pig-lady a little better, so I didn’t argue as we went our separate ways.

I gave Miss Maggie a friendly smile, but she merely huffed in response. Getting the stubborn chef to like me was going to be a challenge, but I was up for it, and I wasn’t going to let this opportunity go to waste.

I followed the pig-lady silently beneath the mushroom caps, and I glanced from side to side with each step I took. I’d never seen a Clover Card before, so I wasn’t entirely sure what I was looking for, but I figured I’d know it when I saw it.

Miss Maggie wasn't the most eager conversationalist, but I attempted to strike up some small talk every once in a while. I commented on the weather and the massive mushroom trees, and then discussed what I'd experienced since waking up in All-the-land before I mentioned how impressed I was with the treetop city of Havenwood, but I still received only snorts and huffs in response.

I wasn't going to give up, though, and I walked in silence for a while as I thought over the best way to break through the pig-woman's walls. There was no way I was just going to accept she didn't like me, and I was determined to find something to connect over.

"Una seems to really believe in me," I said after a long period of silence. "But you don't seem to be the kind of person to easily believe in anything."

"I'm not," Miss Maggie said, and she shot me a sideways glance. "Believing winds up as hurting, and I've suffered enough pain to last me lifetimes."

"I get that." My smile turned sympathetic. "When did you stop believing?"

"What makes you think I ever believed at all?" the chef countered.

“Because of the pain you mentioned,” I said. “There’s got to be a story there.”

“Let’s just focus on finding these Clover Cards and getting a potion for you,” Miss Maggie said, and she narrowed her beady eyes at me. “I know what you’re trying to do, and it won’t work. The sooner we prove you’re not the Dreamer, the sooner I can get back to my life.”

“I’m not trying to do anything.” I held up my hands in the universal gesture of surrender. “I just wanted to get to know you better. I have my own vetting process. For all I know, you could be leading me to my death, and you are acting kind of sus.”

I was hoping to get her worked up enough that her real issues would come to light, and we could deal with them once and for all, but there was a chance I was about to get punched in the face by a pig-lady.

“Sus?” Miss Maggie huffed in an offended tone.

“Suspicious,” I provided, and I arched one eyebrow. Of course, the pig-lady from the fantasy world I’d dreamed up didn’t understand my reference to a popular video game. “Everyone else seems happy enough to have some hope in their lives. Maybe you’re really working for the Dark King, and the Dreamer showing up on your doorstep messes up all your plans.”

“How d-d-dare you?” Miss Maggie’s face turned crimson as she stammered in anger. Her steps became stomps, and she swung her arms wildly while she walked. “I have been there for the people of Havenwood ever since my cowardly husband laid down his sword and turned tail! He wasn’t man enough to go into battle, but I could not fight in his place...”

“Why not?” I asked in a gentle voice, and I struggled to keep up with her.

Now, we were talking.

“I have a daughter,” Miss Maggie sighed, and her shoulders slumped as she accepted defeat. “I have to keep her safe, and she’d already lost her father to cowardice.”

“I think I met her,” I said with an encouraging smile. “She’s adorable.”

“She is my everything,” Miss Maggie said as her chin quivered. “I wasn’t going to leave her as an orphan. Not after what the Dark King did to All-the-land. He’s ruined everything, all my dreams are ashes, and my husband refused to do his part to stop it. Maybe if he had gone to fight... Maybe we wouldn’t be in this mess.”

“That’s totally understandable,” I said.

“What else was I supposed to do?” Miss Maggie had stopped walking, and she waved around her hands as the words began to tumble out of her. Her eyes were earnest as they locked with mine, and I had a feeling I’d broken the dam on her feelings. “I feel for the people suffering, but I cannot do more than hide behind the walls of Havenwood. I am no better than my husband, let the Dark King take him, and what example does that give for my daughter? She is doomed to grow up to be a coward, just like her mother and father.”

I suddenly understood why the pig-chef-lady was so hesitant to trust me. She’d placed all of her trust in her husband, and he had failed her. Now, she was angry and bitter, but she was projecting her rage onto anyone with a penis.

“I’m not your husband,” I pointed out in a calm voice. “I don’t need to tell you about how different I am from all the others. You’ll see with your own eyes, Miss Maggie.”

I gave her a warm smile, and I jerked my head toward the path ahead.

“You’re right,” Miss Maggie sighed, and the corners of her lips pulled into the slightest hint of a smile. “I need to stop treating you like you are the one who ran off and left me.”

“I’d appreciate it,” I chuckled. “But I understand. I’m not trying to hurt you, or anyone. Especially not Una. She’s already very special to me.”

“You be careful with my Una,” Miss Maggie growled, and her eyes turned hard once more. “She’s never been hurt by a man she loves, and you’re not going to change that any time soon. If you understand that, then we will get along fine.”

“I would never do anything to hurt Una,” I insisted in a solemn tone. “I’ll swear by anything you want.”

“Swearing is bad,” Miss Maggie replied, but her gaze softened a little. “I will keep an eye on you, but you’re not a bad egg, Alex.”

I wanted to pump my fist in a victory dance, but I resisted the urge and settled for a charming smile instead. I’d cracked the shell of the pig-lady, and the rest of our trip through the mushroom forest would be much more pleasant without the tension between us.

We hit a sunny spot where we could see beneath the caps of the mushrooms for a good distance, and I warmed myself in the rays as we peered in every direction. I didn’t see anything other than dirt and the impossibly tall stalks, and after a few more moments, we continued onward. Miss Maggie grew more and more tense with each passing minute, and I stayed just a pace behind her so as not to get in her way.

We'd gotten pretty far away from the others, and I was starting to feel anxious about being away from Una, but then Miss Maggie came to another halt. The pig-lady sniffed the air curiously, and her beady eyes widened.

"I can smell them nearby," Miss Maggie whispered. "We must tell Doctor Kria and Una at once."

"But I can't see anything," I argued, and I glanced around at the empty forest.

Then I heard a man's cruel laughter in the distance, and a shiver ran down my spine. It was the first masculine voice I'd heard since waking up in All-the-land, but my automatic reaction was to run the other way. These men were up to no good, and I didn't even need to look at them to know it.

"Is that them?" I whispered.

Miss Maggie nodded silently, and she pulled me behind one of the stalks of the gigantic mushrooms. Then she let out a long, low whistle, and I heard a distant meow in response. The cat noise sounded pretty far away, and I hoped the other two would make it back to us before the Clover Cards came into view.

We waited for what seemed like forever, but it couldn't have been more than a few moments. Miss Maggie and I stayed silent, but my eyes were locked on the road on the other side of the mushroom stalk. I was torn

between wanting to find out what a Clover Card was, and running far away from the danger.

Una and Doctor Kria appeared by my side a few minutes later, and the smiling cat-girl slid her hand back into mine. The mousey doctor had a worried frown creasing her eyebrows, but the wrinkles lining her face indicated it was a common expression for her to wear.

Before I could greet the two women, a loud crashing sound echoed through the forest, and we all turned to look in the direction of the sound. I hid behind the mushroom stalk, and I peered around it in search of whatever the fuck a Clover Card was.

Then I saw a troop of over ten armored men as they marched beneath the mushrooms, and they led a team of weird-looking horses between them. The men laughed and talked among themselves, and they were completely unaware of the four sets of eyes watching their every move. They clamored down the road, seemingly without a care in the world, but then my eyes went to the horse-like creatures walking between them.

The horses had two prong-like horns on their heads, and four eyes blinked about in all directions. The steeds were monochrome in color, and they were patterned in black-and-white squares, but they looked almost transparent when they walked beneath a random stream of sunlight.

Strapped to their backs was the yoke of a wagon, which was piled high with glass containers full of colorful liquids.

Potions. And lots of them.

I was almost too hypnotized by the insane creatures before me to look at the men, but then my gaze slid over one of their shields as they marched past. The square shape was painted to look like a three of clovers, and the man who held it tossed back his head to laugh at a joke I couldn't hear.

I'd half-expected some Alice in Wonderland type of animated card, but a bunch of men in full plate metal was even more intimidating than a piece of paper with arms and legs. I wondered what they looked like beneath their helmets, but I'd probably have to kill them to find out.

I pulled my sword free from its sheath as quietly as I could, and I gestured with finger signals for the women to follow my lead, but I received only confused head tilts in response. I sighed as I beckoned them in closer, but I waited until we were all practically touching each other before I spoke.

"Time for the distraction phase of my plan," I whispered, and I sent up a silent thank you to every strategy video game I'd played over the

years. At least I had some kind of experience with combat situations. “I’ll go to the front, the rest of you circle around behind them.”

“We’re just here for potions,” Miss Maggie hissed. “Let’s just run in, grab them, and then get out.”

“They’ll just follow us back to Havenwood,” I said as quietly as I could. “We can’t let them live. Once I drink one of the potions, I’ll take them all out, but first, I need you three to get them away from the wagon.”

I talked a big game for a man who’d only recently held a sword for the first time, but I was determined to get my hands on those potions. Once I did, taking care of a few assholes would be simple enough, and the memory of me standing above the trees in giant form flashed through my mind. A ‘big’ potion would certainly come in handy right about now, but I had to get my hands on them first.

“We should listen to Alex,” Una urged with a wide-eyed look. “He is the Dreamer.”

“We won’t know that for certain until we get the potions,” Miss Maggie whispered.

“Enough,” I hissed as I placed a finger across my lips, and the women fell silent. I gave them a stern look before I removed my digit, but

no one made any more noise. I nodded in satisfaction, and then I once again gestured for them to follow my lead.

This time, all three women followed behind me until we were a safe distance away from the Clover Cards, and then we split up in order to surround our opponents from all sides. Una flashed me a mischievous wink before she disappeared from view, and I hoped she would be okay until we were back together. I already felt unexplainably protective over the odd cat-girl, and it was difficult to watch her walk away yet again.

The three women split ranks as they hopped from mushroom stalk to mushroom stalk, and we made sure to wait until the Clover Cards were distracted by something in the road before we moved any closer. I peered around my hiding place in search of the others, and I made eye contact with each of them before I nodded.

It was go time.

“Hey, you!” Una yelled as she jumped out into the middle of the road in front of the caravan of Clover Cards. “Where are you taking all those potions? Awfully greedy to hog them all to yourselves, don’t you think?”

I was amazed at her level of bravery, but I hoped it didn’t get her hurt, or worse, and I knew I would do anything in my power to protect her.

“Who the fuck said that?” one Clover Card asked another.

The armored men all turned to look at each other, and the sound of metallic creaking filled the air. Each of their movements sounded like a rusty hinge, and they weren't being very subtle about their actions. They drew their swords with a metal whoosh, and then their eyes finally landed on the cat-girl.

"Hey, look, Three," one of the Clover Cards with four clovers painted on his shield chuckled. "We've got ourselves a hero."

The two Cards jostled elbows, and their laughter echoed through the air.

"I see that, Four," the man with three clovers on his shield replied, and his shiny metal helmet swiveled as the soldier glanced from Una to his companions. "Let's teach it a lesson it won't soon forget."

Two of the Clover Cards lunged for Una at the same time, and she started to backpedal down the road to avoid their reaching arms, but her violet eyes flicked to my hiding place as if looking for instruction.

I waited until I spotted the other women inching toward the wagon full of potions, and then signaled for Una to run. The cat-girl nodded subtly, and she swiveled to dash away from the Clover Cards as fast as she could.

I glanced over to make sure the armored men were following, and sure enough, eight of the ten soldiers dashed after the cat-girl. The other

two remained near the wagon, but Doctor Kria and Miss Maggie were drawing steadily closer to them.

My heart hammered against my ribcage, but I told myself to stay calm. I hoped the women managed to keep the Clover Cards occupied long enough for me to grab some of the potions, but there were still two of the armored men left guarding the wagon. The eight Clover Cards were quickly gaining ground on Una despite being weighed down by so much armor, and I watched as she pumped her legs even faster.

Hopefully, the soldiers would be nice and tired when I finally got my hands on a potion and confronted them.

“Get back here!” a Clover shouted at the cat-girl.

“Come and get me!” she taunted over her shoulder.

I heard the rattling of their armor, but she was already running as fast as she could. Then I heard the whoosh of a sword being drawn nearby, and my eyes flicked back to the wagon to see the other two Clover Cards chasing down Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria with their weapons swinging through the air.

At last, the wagon full of potions was unguarded, and I raced across the distance to the cart before I hauled myself up into the back of it. I

grabbed a potion bottle at random, but then I heard a metallic swooshing noise behind me.

I brought my blade up just in time as I launched out of the squat to slash into a Clover's weapon. One of the bastards must have been hiding on the other side of the wagon. The metallic clang rang loudly in my ears, and stars filled my vision, so I nearly missed the chance to block the Card's next strike.

"Oh, shit," I gasped, and I swiveled as I brought my blade up to cover my face.

I counted my enemies quickly, and I realized I was outnumbered yet again. Three of the Clover Cards had returned to the wagon and caught me red-handed, but all I had to do was keep them off me long enough to chug the magical elixir. I desperately hoped Una was okay, but I didn't have time to look for her.

My opponent's sword clanged against mine so hard my arms shook, but then the two hilts locked together. I pressed into the handle of my weapon with all my might, and I shoved the Clover back with sheer force as our blades remained locked together.

"The wagon!" a voice shouted from down the road, and all the Clover Cards chasing my friends paused with their weapons raised in mid-

air to look back toward their load.

I crouched on top of the pile of potions, but then I made eye contact with the cat-girl from across the road. She'd climbed up one of the giant mushroom stalks to cling to its side, and her tail swayed heavily from left to right as she tried to maintain her balance.

"Get him!" a Clover Card beside me yelled, and the armored men abandoned the chase in favor of protecting their potions.

I used the moment to my advantage, though, and I shoved my opponents back with the flat of my blade. Two Clover Cards went down with a loud crash as their armor met the dirt road, but the other six were quickly covering the distance between them and the wagon.

Then they spotted Una where she clung to the mushroom tree, and half of them changed their trajectory to go after the cat-girl while the other half continued to return to the cart full of potions where I crouched.

So much for our distraction.

"Fight me!" I yelled as I hopped down with a potion bottle clenched tightly in my fist, and I hacked at the back of their running legs as I caught up with them. "I'm the one you want! I'm the Dreamer!"

The Clover Cards aiming for Una kept moving in her direction, so I had to kick my legs in swift blurs of motion in order to pass by them. Then

I still had to hurry to reach the woman before they could, and I skidded to a breathless halt as soon as I reached the mushroom where Una clung.

“Are you okay?” I gasped out.

“Alex, behind you!” Una shouted.

“What?” I asked, but I had just enough time to turn around and block the blow of a sword with my weapon, and I parried blow after blow with the potion bottle cradled against my chest. I needed to either drink it or get it safely put away, but the Clover wasn’t giving me a moment to breathe, let alone move things about my person.

I backed away from my opponent slowly with each parried attack until my spine was pressed against the stalk of the mushroom Una had climbed up, and I quickly realized I was outmatched by his skill. He twirled his weapon like it was as light as a feather, and meanwhile, mine felt like it weighed a ton. My muscles ached, and my entire body was covered in sweat from all the running around.

I wasn’t going to win this fight in this shape.

I needed to regroup.

If I could gain a little ground, then I could chug the potion clutched in my hand, but I had to get these fuckers off me first.

“Fuck off,” I spat as I shoved my attacker off me with a burst of stamina, and then I shot a glance around at my companions. Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria were surrounded by the remaining Clover Cards, and they stood watching me fight with terror in their eyes.

They knew better than I did what would happen if I didn’t save them from the minions of the Dark King, and I could tell they were both thinking about the worst-case scenario as they stood frozen in place.

There was no way I was going to let that happen, and I clenched my jaw as I decided it was time to be ruthless. I’d been on the defensive this entire time in hopes the ladies could get some of the potions and then get away, but that hope was thoroughly dashed now.

Ten assholes stood between me and my companions, and I was determined to kill every single one of them. Peaceful Alex was gone, and I had the sudden desire to drain the blood of my enemies.

“Come at me, assholes,” I said, and I twirled my sword around in my grip before I slashed at the closest Clover Card.

I was starting to get the hang of this sword thing.

He met my blow with his shield, and I barely registered the two clovers painted on the front of it before the jarring sensation jolted the length of my arm. I almost dropped my sword, but somehow I managed to

keep it in my grip, so I followed the momentum of the shield up and over until the tip of my weapon was beneath the chin of his helmet.

His sword came up between his chest and my blade, and he batted my weapon away like it was a prop. It flew out of my hands, which were still numb and tingly from the interaction with his shield, and it landed buried to the hilt in the road to my right.

I lunged toward my sword like a baseball player sliding home, and I felt the whoosh of blades swinging above my head as I rolled across the ground to yank my weapon free from the dirt.

“Missed me!” I taunted as I came to my feet with my sword in one hand and the potions still clutched against my chest with my other arm.

Time to get big, or strong, or something magical.

I backpedaled away from the Clover Cards while I maneuvered the bottle into my fist. Then I bit down on the cork, pulled it free, and spat it to the side. I didn’t even bother looking at the label before I put it back against my lips and tilted my head back.

I was about to chug the potion when a whirlwind of white spun out of the mushroom forest and collided with me before it rammed into one of the Clover Cards closing in on my companions.

The blur of white focused into a spinning tornado of feathers, but as it hit each Clover Card, they fell in a loud crash of metal and swinging limbs. Then it came to a halt, and my jaw nearly hit the floor. I stood frozen with the potion clutched in my arms as I stared at the newcomer in awe.

It was a woman, and she was drop dead gorgeous.

Chapter Seven

I snapped my open jaw shut with a clack, and I blinked several times to make sure of what I was seeing. The stranger still stood before me with her sword moving at lightning speed, and she didn't pause in her annihilation of the Clover Cards to introduce herself.

Who the hell was this woman, and why had she chosen to help us?

Was she after the potions for herself?

The thought was unsettling, but I held out hope the stranger was one of the rebels. Then I took advantage of the sudden distraction to chug down whatever the hell was inside the potion bottle clutched in my fist.

My entire body began to tingle instantly, and the potion container suddenly shattered in my fist. I blinked down at my hand suspiciously as I tried to figure out what the fuck was happening to me. Before my eyes, the palm of my hand turned gray, and I twitched my fingers experimentally.

It sounded like rocks grinding against each other.

What the hell did I just drink?

Just as I looked up, I saw a Clover Card coming at me with his sword flying over his head, so I didn't have time to look for a label among the glass remains on the ground. I brought up my now-empty left arm

instinctively, and I sent up a silent prayer to the dream gods that I wasn't about to die. The sound of metal cracking filled my ears, and I opened my eyes to find the Clover Card holding the hilt of his broken sword.

Then I glanced down at my arm where his blade had struck, and I saw rocks covering the surface of my skin. The Clover Card's weapon hadn't even left a scratch, and I grinned as realization dawned on me.

My entire body was as hard as a rock.

"Fuck, yeah!" I shouted, and the soundtrack to every Chevy commercial I'd ever seen played in my head as I gripped my sword and marched toward the Clover Card with the broken weapon.

All traces of fear vanished, and I swung my sword wildly.

The Clover Card attempted to block the blow with his broken blade, and he caught the edge of my steel against the hilt clutched in his fist. His hand shook from the effort it took to withstand my newfound strength, but then I lifted my free arm and slammed my fist into the front of his helmet.

The metal crumpled beneath the weight of my rock-hands, and the Clover Card flew backward into the dirt with a heavy thud. I cackled as I jumped forward, grabbed him by the neck of his chest piece, and drove my sword into the unarmored spot between his helmet and breastplate.

I barely had time to register my first kill before I let him fall from my hands, but a shudder ran down my spine as the realization struck me. I peered at my newly transformed body in awe. It was like my entire body was made of stone, and the impenetrable surface made gravelly creaks every time I moved. I didn't feel any different inside the rock skin, other than being unbeatable now.

"I'm the Juggernaut, bitch!" I laughed. "Or, I guess I'm more like The Thing. Either way, I'm going to fuck you all up now."

The next Clover Card that came at me met a similar fate, and I thoroughly enjoyed the confused head tilt he gave me when I didn't even bother to block his attack. Then his weapon bounced off my shoulder like he'd just whacked a boulder, and he quickly began to backpedal away from me.

"They got to the potions!" the Card man cried to his companions, but they were too busy fighting off the mysterious woman to hear his warning.

This dream fluctuated to a nightmare like a pendulum, but at least the women were easy on the eyes.

Then my gaze returned to the beautiful feathered woman who suddenly stood in our midst. Our mysterious ally slashed a blade out with a flick of her wrist, and another Clover Card fell by her hand. A ring of

smoke encircled her face, so it was hard to make out the details of what she looked like, but she had a striking figure.

“High, ho! High, ho! It’s a traveler’s life for me!” the strange woman sang in a jolly sea chanty before she swiveled around to drive her blade into the neck of another armored goon who’d attempted to attack her from behind. The tail of her waistcoat fluttered with her movement, and she nearly lost her hat. “A nip and a tuck, and don’t forget to suck, in your gut... as you sing!”

“What. The. Fuck.” I shook my head in disbelief at what I was seeing.

Whoever this woman was, she was completely overdressed for a fight in the middle of a mushroom forest, but I didn’t have time to appreciate the view any longer since another Clover Card was coming toward me with his sword swinging.

I easily blocked the blow with a rock arm and scampered backward to gain more space, but the Clover Card followed quickly in my wake, so I lunged forward to meet his attack instead. My blade sliced between his shoulder and breastplate, and black blood began to seep from the wound as soon as I pulled my weapon free.

It wasn't a fatal blow, though, and my enemy came at me with his shield next. The wound continued to pour the black sludge, and soon it was dripping to the dirt road. Then I had to slide to the side to avoid being sprayed with the thing's blood, and I spun around in order to meet a subsequent jab of his sword with my rock chest.

His blade shattered into multiple pieces, and he threw the hilt at me like a toddler throwing a tantrum, but the handle bounced harmlessly off my stony exterior.

Now, I was having fun.

I continued forward until he was inside my range of attack, and I spun around with my blade raised and ready to land a fatal blow. The Clover Card lunged away from me, but the next thing I knew, a blade jutted from his chest, and the beautiful bird-girl pulled her weapon free as a fountain of black blood sprayed from the gaping hole.

"Oh, a run in there, an adventure here, what else does a traveler do, my dear?" The weird bird-woman continued to sing the entire time she fought off the Clover Cards, but they were falling beneath her sword like butter beneath a hot knife.

I wasn't about to let her take all the glory, so I hopped back into the fray. I slashed at the closest Clover Card, and I made my way steadily

closer to the wagon where my friends waited. Una scampered down from the giant mushroom to climb into the cart, and she hissed and scratched at a Clover getting too close for their comfort, but then the cat-girl nearly toppled from the top of the pile of potions.

I had to kill these card-thing-guys before something bad happened to my feline companion, so I attacked the Clover Cards with a fervor, and the strange bird-woman was right by my side the entire time.

I was having the time of my life now that I had hands made of rocks, and a wide grin split my face while sweat crept down my brow. My fists went straight through their ink-bag faces with a single punch, and I beat them until blood seeped from every junction of their armor.

The two of us fought together until we killed off the rest of the Clover Cards and stood in the middle of a pile of bodies, but by that time, I was covered in blood from my head to my toes while the beautiful bird-girl flicked black specks of gore from her blade.

I hurried over to the others to check to make sure everyone was uninjured, and Una's eyes filled with relief.

"Oh, Alex, you killed them all!" the cat-girl gasped as an awed expression crossed her face. "I knew you would save us, but I had no idea you were so strong!"

“You, er, did good,” Miss Maggie said with obvious reluctance, and then Doctor Kria nudged the pig-lady encouragingly. “Thank you, Alex. Your plan was good, but we kind of blew it, so we are lucky you were here.”

“I agree,” the mousey doctor added with a curt nod. “Your performance was very admirable.”

“It’s all thanks to the potion I drank,” I explained with a shrug.

“You took a potion?” The doctor’s eyes widened as she scanned me up and down.

“Was it a do nothing potion?” Miss Maggie huffed. “You seemed plenty capable of taking the Cards out on your own.”

They hadn’t even noticed me going Hulk mode. I looked down at my gray skin and flexed my rocky fingers.

“The rock stuff certainly helped.” I laughed as I waved my hand through the air, but the women didn’t seem to register my point. “But it was still much easier than I expected, thanks to whoever the hell that woman is.”

“You should go talk to her,” Una suggested as she peered around me at the bird-woman.

“Alright.” I inhaled.

Then I crossed the roadside battleground to where the bird-woman stood smoking her pipe and surveying the damage her blade had caused.

“You came just in time,” I said in an awed tone as I got the chance to look her up and down for the first time. “Who... Who are you?”

The bird-woman’s long all-white hair was pulled back at the nape of her neck with a blue ribbon, and the strip of fabric matched the blue vest she wore beneath a black waistcoat. On the top of her head was a black tri-cornered hat like the colonists used to wear, and a corncob pipe stuck out the corner of her mouth. Instead of a nose she had a cute small yellow beak, and a ring of feathers circled her neck.

She looked like someone combined an African Gray parrot with a beautiful woman, and the combination was strangely appealing. The cleavage pushing at the restraints of her shirt and the steep curve of her generous ass didn’t hurt, but the beak on her face was very distracting.

“By the Dreamer’s coming, you’re a human!” The bird-woman’s mouth fell open, and she gaped unabashedly at me for a long moment while I awkwardly ran my hands through my hair and straightened my clothes. “How long have you been in All-the-land? Have you drunk the vile poisons?”

“I’ve already asked you a question,” I pointed out in a calm voice.

“Answer me, and I’ll answer you.”

Every inch of my flesh was a gray, rocky hue. The answer should be obvious, but this was All-the-land after all. It seemed as though I was starting to get the hang of talking to people here, and I grinned to myself.

“Oh, a game!” The bird-woman clapped her hands, and her blue eyes lit up. “I do love a good sport. What was your query?”

“Who are you?” I repeated, but I made sure to give her my most charming smile.

“Why, I am Mae, Mae am I, me and Mae, we are the same,” the strange bird-woman said in a sing-song voice, and she did an odd jig.

“Hi, Mae,” I said, and I took a moment to congratulate myself on being able to process the absurdity of this dream world at a much faster pace. At this rate, I could encounter any insane possibilities without losing my composure. “My name is Alex.”

“He’s the Dreamer!” Una whispered in a conspiratorial tone as she came to stand beside me, but the mysterious bird-woman didn’t seem to hear her.

Meanwhile, my skin began to tingle again, and when I glanced down, the pinkish hue had returned. The potion had worn off already, but I still felt

like me. Then I realized the mysterious lady was speaking to me, and I returned my focus to the conversation.

“Alex, are you vexed? Or vested?” The woman tapped a finger against her chin as she peered off into the distance with a thoughtful expression on her face. Then she snapped her fingers, and blue eyes met mine. “You are invested! How have you come to be human, Alex?”

“That’s three questions,” I chuckled, but then I suddenly realized my three female companions were staring at us like we’d gone completely bonkers. They eyed the strange woman who’d come to our aide curiously, but no one rushed forward to introduce themselves, so it looked like it was up to me. “Alex is short for Alexander, and I am currently wearing a vest thing, but here, let me introduce you to my friends first.”

I turned and gestured for my friends to come say hello.

“Hello, you may call me Una,” the beautiful cat-girl said as she scurried forward to inspect the bird-girl, and her nose wrinkled as she inhaled the new person’s scent before she sat back on her haunches. “Or you can come up with a new name if you wish.”

“I do not wish.” Mae peered down her beak-nose at the curious cat-girl. “I merely am, and what I am, is me.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Mae,” Una giggled. “You are strange, and I enjoy that about you.”

“Call me Mags,” Miss Maggie grunted, and her beady eyes flicked to the strange woman’s weapon, but there was respect obvious in her gaze.

“I am Doctor Kria,” the mouse-eared doctor said with a stiff bow. “I have heard tales of you, Mae.”

“My adventures are sung about in many a song,” Mae said with a knowing nod. “I have long traveled All-the-land in search of the Dark King’s palace. Soon, I will end his reign of terror once and for all. No Dreamer required.”

“How many songs?” Una asked with a curious tilt of her head.

“Good, everyone’s met everyone.” I clapped my hands together and gave them all a broad grin. “Now, who wants to get the fuck out of here?”

“I would enjoy being home,” Miss Maggie huffed, and her dark eyes darted around in search of more card men.

“What do we do with this mess?” Doctor Kria asked as she cast a glance around at the dead Clover Cards.

“Burn the bodies!” Mae declared. “Have our enemies running scared.”

“Mushroom Valley is very flammable,” Una pointed out with a concerned frown. “We came for potions, and potions we have.”

“You think we should just leave these guys on the road?” I asked. “Wouldn’t that alert the Dark King to the presence of rebels in these woods?”

“We will be back in Havenwood long before the news of these men’s deaths returns to the Dark Palace,” Miss Maggie assured me.

I eyed the fallen Clover Cards curiously for a minute, and then I realized one of the men I stared at was close to my size. I squatted down beside him for a closer look, and I discovered his armor remained in very good condition, so I began to pull pieces of it free. I placed them in a neat little pile, but Una joined me before I had finished.

“What are you doing?” Una asked with a curious tilt of her head.

“I want this armor,” I explained. “I don’t care what we do with the men, but I think we should take their armor and weapons with us back to Havenwood. They could prove useful in the future.”

“Prove, proof! I almost forgot!” Una gasped, and she hopped to her feet in one bound, only to nearly topple back over again. “You must drink a potion, Alex! Show the others who you truly are!”

“I already--” I started to say, but then the bird-woman let out a loud snort.

“Why in the Dreamer’s coming would one want to drink one of the dastardly devious drinks?” Mae’s eyes widened, and the feathers around her neck ruffled like a dog raising its hackles. “The entire wagon needs to be destroyed!”

“We should wait for you to drink one of the potions until we are safely in Havenwood,” Miss Maggie argued with a shake of her head. “Everyone will want to see.”

Apparently, no one had noticed I’d drunk the rock skin elixir.

Oh, well. Nothing bad had happened to me, so I wasn’t worried about drinking another one.

“Burn them all, I say,” Mae repeated with a fevered look in her blue eyes.

“We aren’t destroying the potions,” I said in a commanding tone, but the bird-lady didn’t seem to hear me, so I turned to my three companions.

“We will take the entire wagon with us back to Havenwood. I guess I’ll just have to drink another one when we get back so everyone can see.”

“The lot of you are just as bad as the Dark King,” the newcomer huffed. “Drinking the poisons that ruin your life... It’s a shame what has

become of my beautiful All-the-land, but to run into locals willingly walking toward certain death, not to mention disease--”

“I take it you are anti-potion?” I asked with a raised eyebrow.

“And you are pro-potion?” Mae countered, but then she scanned me up and down. “I must say, you do have nice proportions. Weren’t you a different color when we met? This one suits you.”

“T-Thanks?” I smiled awkwardly since I’d never been complimented by a smoking hot bird-lady singing pirate-swashbuckler before, and I wasn’t quite sure what the appropriate response was. Should I get her a rock? “But we are still taking the potions back to Havenwood. Thank you, again, for helping us with the Clover Cards.”

“Havenwood?” The bird-lady rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. “I’ve never been, and that is a rarity, for I have been to a great many places, but that is neither here nor now.”

Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria exchanged a glance, but they didn’t comment, and the two ladies began to strip more armor from the Clover Cards. They started to toss the metallic pieces into the wagon, and the sound of metal clinking against glass filled the air.

I supposed it was up to me to vet this newcomer in our midst.

“So, where were you going?” I asked. “If not Havenwood.”

“I was on my way to the Dark King’s Palace,” Mae announced, and she struck a heroic pose with her hands on her hips. “To defeat him, once and for all!”

“You’re the Dreamer?” Miss Maggie asked, and she cast me a glare before she turned her gaze back to the bird-woman. “You certainly are strange enough...”

“Unfortunately, no,” Mae sighed. “I was born here in All-the-land, just like all of you, but I have been on a quest to destroy the Dark King.”

“Alex is the Dreamer!” Una insisted in a loud voice, and she came to stand beside me with a defensive air. “He is the one who will save us all!”

“Hey, if there’s someone else willing to take on all the dark stuff around here, then have at it.” I shrugged, but I couldn’t help thinking about how I’d just drank one of the potions without any negative side effects afterward. “I didn’t ask to be the Dreamer.”

“You?” The bird-lady’s eyes widened as she peered down her beak at me, and I was suddenly mesmerized by the icy-blue hue of her gaze. “But you’re not even a Dodo bird.”

“Is that what you are?” I asked with a curious glance down at her booted feet. How much of her was bird? And how much was woman?

“Yes, indeed, as you can see,” Mae gestured at her person like this should have all been very obvious to me.

“Alex is from Earth,” Una explained. “He doesn’t know how All-the-land works. He IS the Dreamer.”

“Only one way to find out!” Mae clapped her hands together, puffed on her pipe a few times, and then pulled a random potion from the back of the wagon. “Here, drink the poison.”

“Yeah, that sounds so appetizing,” I said with lifted eyebrows. “You didn’t even read the label. Besides, I’ve already drunk them and nothing happened.”

“If you’re the Dreamer, then it shouldn’t matter,” Mae countered. “What’s the harm in trying?”

“For starters, you’re not the only one who wants to find out if Alex is the Dreamer or not,” Miss Maggie said, and she crossed her arms over her chest as she leveled the bird-lady with a stern glare. “We found him first. The people of Havenwood deserve to see for themselves that his claims are false. You will not deny them this, stranger.”

“I will accompany you,” Mae said with a decisive nod, and she seemed oblivious to Miss Maggie’s harsh demeanor. She seemed oblivious in general, but she was hot, so I didn’t care. She could come with us

wherever she wanted, just as long as I got to keep staring at her out of the corner of my eyes.

Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria exchanged another glance, but then they both turned back to the Dodo with nods of their own.

“We will allow you to travel with us to Havenwood,” Miss Maggie said.

“Gratitude,” Mae replied with a dip of her head.

“I could use some help,” I said as I gestured to the half-undressed Clover Card at my feet. “Let’s get all the armor off them before we head home.”

I shot a self-conscious glance at Una, but she hadn’t caught me referring to Havenwood as my home, or at least she didn’t seem to react, so I let out my breath and returned to the Clover Card.

We all worked together to finish the task of stripping the armor and weapons off the Clover Cards, but I was curious to find out what was beneath their metal coverings, so I pulled the helmet off the one around my size and found a faceless man twisted with deformities whose skin was the color of squid ink. The skin bulged over the liquid flesh like a bubble about to burst, and his chest was completely caved in like he’d already been drained of a lot of blood. A puncture wound near the spot where a rib cage

would have been was evidence of my theory, and I had a sudden spark of realization.

They were like bags of ink in the shape of men.

I shook my head in awe at the sheer weirdness I was surrounded by. This dream kept getting stranger and stranger, but there was still no end in sight. I didn't know what I would have to do in order to wake up, but none of my usual tricks had worked so far, so I was just riding it out at this point.

I had a feeling the Clover Card's balloon-like skin would rupture the instant we tried to move them, which would result in us all being covered in their black, ink-like blood, as well as evidence of our encounter spilled all over the roadway.

What were these things even made out of in the first place?

Maybe they really were just an animated deck of cards?

I glanced around at the women, but they were all much further along in the armor removal process than I was, so I refocused on my task with renewed vigor. Once I had all the metallic pieces with leather straps removed from the weird ink blob, the Clover Card resembled a bean bag more than a person. It was like the armor had been what shaped it into a man, and I shuddered to think about what other minions the Dark King had at his disposal.

Then I stacked all my salvaged armor in the wagon loaded with potions, and I drew my sword as I returned to the black blob. I made sure to stand back at a safe distance, and I poked it with the tip of my weapon until my blade slid into its flesh. When I withdrew, a spigot of ink-like blood spewed from the puncture to paint the road, and my theory was confirmed.

“Be careful,” I warned the others. “We don’t want to end up covered in their blood.”

“You have never seen a Clover Card?” Mae asked with a confused look. Her eyes flicked from my head to my feet and back again. “Are you not a man?”

“I am a man,” I said. “I’m just not from around here, remember? I’m just a normal human male from Earth.”

Calling myself a male felt weird, but I had a feeling the odd Dodo-woman would understand that term easier than others.

“There are none of those in All-the-land.” The dodo pulled the pipe from the corner of her mouth, and then she pointed the stem at me in an accusatory way. “How did you come to be human?”

“I was born this way,” I said. “How did you become a bird-woman?”

“I am from a wondrous legacy of Dodos,” Mae replied, and she puffed out her chest with pride.

“So, you were born a bird,” I paraphrased with a roll of my hand.

“Therefore, I was born human.”

“Preposterous,” Mae huffed. “No one in All-the-land is born as a human.”

“I am not from All-the-land,” I repeated in a painfully slow voice. “I am from Earth. I woke up here yesterday.”

That felt strange to say.

“But the prophecy!” Mae shook her head. “It is impossible.”

“Nothing is impossible in All-the-land,” Una interjected in a cheerful tone, and she came to stand by my side with squared shoulders. Her tail curled around the back of my calves, and she flashed me a toothy grin. “But we should really move away from this location soon. The Cards will be missed before the day is through.”

“She’s right,” Doctor Kria said. “We are less than a day’s travel from the Clover Queen’s fortress, so they will expect these potions before nightfall. We must get back to Havenwood before then.”

“Indeed,” Mae said. “The steeds will do the heavy lifting for a while longer. Now, onward to your safe haven, and I will guard the rear.”

I helped the girls drag the dead bodies away from the wagon and the horse-like creatures’ path, Mae pulled her sword to guard our backs, and the

others clambered on top of the load while Una and I took the steeds' lead ropes.

We were ready to head back to Havenwood.

Except, I had no idea which way to go.

Fortunately, Una took the lead, and she flashed me a cheeky grin over her shoulder before she trotted ahead of me. Her purple-blue striped tail swayed from side to side, and I followed behind with a shit-eating grin on my face. I could walk behind her forever and be happy.

We made our way back through the mushroom forest, but it was slow going at times because we had to deviate from the road. The wheels of the wagon bounced over the bumps in the ground, and some potions went overboard a couple of times. Luckily, the bottles didn't break so they were easy to pick back up, and after a while, the dirt below our feet became smoother. Una rushed to grab each falling container, and she eyed each of them closely for a long moment before placing them back in the cart, but she always released them, so I wasn't too worried.

Still, we needed to get back before her cravings overpowered her self-control.

It didn't take us as long as I expected, and a short while later we arrived in the clearing below Havenwood. Bird song announced our

entrance, and there was a group of animal people waiting by the time we parked the wagon beside the trunk of the giant sequoia. The women climbed down from the wagon, and Miss Maggie adjusted her dress before she strode to the front of the crowd.

“We have managed to eliminate thirteen Clover Cards from play,” the pig-lady announced in a proud tone even though she’d barely lifted a finger against them. “And we brought back enough potions to last a lifetime!”

“Give me one!” someone shouted.

“I need it!” another moaned.

“Potions for everybody,” another voice said.

Everyone rushed forward and grabbed containers of liquid from the wagon, but then cries of alarm swept through the crowd.

“There’s no label!”

“What does this one do?”

“Doctor Kria, help!”

I glanced into the cart and realized everyone was right. A bunch of the potions didn’t have labels on them, so there was no telling what would happen if they were drunk.

“Enough!” Miss Maggie snapped, and she swept her arms out to either side to silence the crowd. “Without labels, these potions are

dangerous, so they will be used for research purposes only. You all know the consequences that come with drinking them, and to not even know what you're getting is even worse. I will not let more of our people fall victim to the opposition. No, these are for Doctor Kria to use as she sees fit."

Moans of disappointment filled the air, but the people began to disperse with quietly muttered complaints. Miss Maggie shooed them away before she turned back to us, and the pig-lady crossed her arms over her chest.

"You see what the potions do to us?" She shook her head. "The cravings get worse and worse the more you drink."

"I'm sorry," was all I could think to say.

I wondered how Una felt after being force fed multiple potions. Was she craving more? I didn't feel the need to drink any more, but I'd only had a couple. The potions definitely had their pros and cons, but if I was immune to the cons, then I could become more powerful than anyone else around.

Was I really the Dreamer?

It was starting to seem more and more likely by the minute, and I was eager to experiment some more, but I didn't think I was addicted to the potions. At least now I had a doctor to watch me for negative side effects.

What would happen to me this time?

First things first, we needed to get everyone upstairs to safety, so I put my hands on my hips as I surveyed the wagon.

“We need a way to get all the potions up the stairs,” I said.

“Oh, the lifters will lower the baskets,” Una assured me with a wave of her hand. “Let’s set these creatures free from their burdens.”

“The horses? Well, they kind of look like horses...” I raised an eyebrow as I considered the things pulling the wagon. Their four sets of eyes blinked back at me, and I shivered. “Set them free?”

“All beings deserve a chance to survive,” Una said.

“Fair enough.” I grinned. “I like the way you think about things, Una.”

“I like a lot of the Alex things about you,” Una replied, but I noticed a blush darken her cheeks. “You’re the most Alex thing I’ve met. Actually, you’re the only Alex I’ve met.”

“I’ve never had someone describe me like that before,” I teased. “I think you like me.”

“It has not been obvious?” Una tilted her head to the side.

“Maybe just a little,” I chuckled.

Then I turned my attention back to unfastening the straps holding the beasts to the wagon's yoke, and a short while later, Una and I let the animals go free. I reached for the cat-girl's hand as we watched the horse-like creatures kick up their heels and run around the clearing. The beasts even rolled around in the tall grass like they'd never been able to scratch their itchy backs, and I wondered what their life in the Clover fortress was like. Una would probably know more, but I didn't want to make her relive any painful memories if it wasn't necessary, so I remained silent for a long while.

"That was a good decision," I finally told the cat-girl with a warm smile.

"They will enjoy their time now." Una nodded. "Now, let's assist the others with the lift."

We returned to the trunk of the tree to find Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria loading huge woven baskets with our stolen stash of unlabeled elixirs, and the beautiful cat-girl quickly rushed over to help them. I followed in her wake, but I took a moment to analyze the engineering of the strange vessel.

The basket was roughly ten feet wide and two feet deep. It hung down from the canopy city by thick, braided ropes, and the people of Havenwood had constructed pulleys out of wood to ease the burden of the

load. A platform dock was built high above us on the edge of the treetop town, and I couldn't believe I hadn't noticed the elevator-like design before.

It would have saved me a lot of stair climbing.

Once we had all the potions loaded into the two baskets, we signaled to the squirrel and the owl at the top to lift the cargo up into the city.

"Can we ride the baskets?" I asked as I considered my sore legs and tired back.

"I do not believe the lifters could lift you," Doctor Kria said, and her cheeks turned a rosy color. "They are very little, and even with the wheels at the top, they cannot carry much."

"But those potions weighed way more than I do," I pointed out. "It's fine, but it would have been nice."

"We don't want anyone to get injured if it breaks," Doctor Kria informed me with a gentle smile. "It is simply not allowed. The stairs remain functional, though."

"It was worth a shot," I chuckled as I headed toward the trunk of the massive tree.

Una sang the password song, and we all slipped through the doorway. We all trotted up at a brisk pace, and I shot a glance over my shoulder to see if Mae followed behind us. The bird-woman pulled up the rear, but I could

barely see her around Miss Maggie's bulky form. I was satisfied I'd get a chance to get to know the bird-woman better, but I knew she was curious whether or not I was the Dreamer.

If only they'd all been paying better attention during the battle, the answer would already be clear.

Once we all made it into the dining hall, I took a seat at what I was starting to consider my usual table, and I glanced around at the others. Miss Maggie let out a loud sigh as she settled onto the bench opposite me, and Doctor Kria nestled her hands in her lap as she situated herself beside the pig-lady.

Una walked straight past me and to a place at the back of the room out of my eyesight. I was curious what she was up to, so I quickly pushed myself up from the bench and followed after her. Someone had moved the potions to the back of the dining hall in the span of time it took us to climb the stairs, and the cat-girl was rifling through them with her tail jutting in the air. The sound of clinking glass filled my ears, and then I heard Una muttering under her breath.

"No, not that one... Nope, still can't find it..." The cat-girl sat back on her haunches with a disappointed frown. "I can't find it anywhere, Alex."

“What are you looking for, exactly?” I asked. “There’s an awful lot of potions to choose from, and without labels, there’s no way to know what you’re getting. Besides, maybe you should reconsider taking any more after what happened the last time.”

“It’s not for me,” Una corrected as she shook her head. “I’m looking for a healing potion, but there are none here.”

“Would it heal the negative side effects of the other potions?” That could come in handy for the people of All-the-land. With the power of potions, the women could stand against the Dark King and overpower his minions. Then I realized the negative opposition effects would cause a healing potion to become the exact opposite when it wore off. It could be incredibly dangerous if put in the wrong hands. “Wait, how would you know which one is a healing potion without labels?”

“I don’t know,” Una sighed. “But I have to try something. My entire mission was to retrieve the ‘heal other’ potion, but all I could find was the recipe.”

“You have the recipe, though?” I asked in a hopeful tone. “How do you make potions?”

“It’s a complicated process,” Una explained. “The ingredients are hard to find, and some of the directions are encrypted by a strange language

I cannot read. I need the Potion Maker to translate the text.”

“And that’s the Livia person you were supposed to break free?” I connected the dots together as she spoke, and I suddenly understood the cat-girl’s frantic search through the potions.

“Any healing potions are incredibly rare,” Una informed me with a sad look in her eyes. “I had one chance to save Livia, but I blew it.”

“No, you didn’t,” I said, and I squeezed her hand warmly. “Because you ran into me, and now I’m going to do whatever I can in order to help you save All-the-land.”

And I meant it.

“It is time to witness the truth of the human’s claim,” Miss Maggie announced in a loud voice over the dining hall chatter. “What potion should we have Alex drink?”

“Any will do,” Doctor Kria said. “We just need to see what happens when the effects wear off.”

“Big or tall, short or small, any will do at all,” Mae sang, and she took a long puff off her pipe. “Best get on with it, then.”

Everyone began to talk at once, and several people crowded around the basket full of potions. Una and I backed away from the crowd, but then Miss Maggie pulled me front and center again. The tall pig-lady kept a firm

hand on my shoulder, and I could tell she wasn't going to let me go anywhere. Not that I would try, but having an imposing figure hovering over your shoulder was a tad discomfoting.

“Let's just grab a random one.” I shrugged. “Any of them will work, right?”

Miss Maggie inspected a couple of the bottles, and then she withdrew a tiny bottle full of sparkling silver liquid. This one actually had a label, though, and we all peered closely at the words scrawled across the paper. Written in bold letters across the front was the word ‘tiny.’

Oh, boy.

The pig-lady handed me the bottle with a mischievous twinkle in her beady eyes, but then Ziti began to bounce up and down at my feet.

“You'll be as small as me for a little while!” the furbae gushed. “Please, oh please, choose tiny!”

“Better than ‘big,’” I chuckled. “We don't want to ruin the roof, after all.”

“Until it wears off,” Mae snorted, and a smoke ring drifted away from her head.

“My thoughts exactly,” Miss Maggie chortled, but then she gestured to the bottle in my hands. “Drink up, Alex, it's time to show us what you

can do.”

“Alright...” I popped the cork of the tiny bottle and lifted the rim to my lips, but I paused before taking a sip to search for Una among the faces of the crowd.

The beautiful cat-girl flashed me an encouraging grin, and that was all the prompting I needed to lift the bottle a little higher and let the silver liquid pour into my mouth. My lips tingled as the potion slid between them, and I had a sudden urge to change my mind, but it was too late to go back.

I only took a sip, and then I returned the cork to the opening. “What now?”

Before anyone could answer me, I felt a strong pulling sensation from inside my body, and I began to slowly shrink. I got smaller and smaller until my clothes became baggy around my form, and then I still continued to shrink. I stared up at the ceiling as it drew steadily further away, and then I glanced at my over-sized companions as I stood in the jumbled pile of my clothes.

Una blinked down at me with the biggest purple eyes, and a wide grin spread across her face. “How do you feel?”

Her voice boomed, and I was almost knocked over by the vibrations in the floor, but I quickly regained my balance.

“Good,” I said as loudly as I could, but I could tell the cat-girl had a hard time hearing me, so I repeated myself in an even louder voice. “I’m good!”

Just then, Ziti bounced over, and the floor shook with every move she made. From this height, the tiny furbae looked like a big pumpkin, and her eyes immediately went to my exposed privates.

“Your clothes no longer fit,” the furbae observed.

I glanced down at my naked body self-consciously, but I wasn’t sure what to do about my lack of clothes.

“I do declare, you have much improved Alex the Vested.” Mae peered down at me, and her icy-blue eyes were like planets from my vantage point.

“Here,” Miss Maggie practically shouted, and she ripped a chunk of fabric off her apron, and I tied it around my waist like a bath towel.

It wasn’t the most fashionable of outfits, but it would work as a temporary fix, so I adjusted it slightly before I nodded my approval.

“I liked him better before,” Mae huffed, and she elbowed Doctor Kria knowingly. “Although, it will be better once the poison wears off.”

“Thank you,” I said in the loudest voice I could muster. “What do I do now?”

Everyone stared at me with anxious expressions, but I didn't want to just stand around while we waited for the potion's effects to wear off, so I turned to the adorable furbae with a wide smile.

"Care to show me the world from your perspective, Ziti?" I asked.

"Oh, yes, oh, yes!" the furbae chanted as she bounced up and down with delight.

"Watch out for the cracks!" Miss Maggie warned.

"Yes, be careful, Alex," Una urged with a worried look.

"I'll be fine," I shouted. "Ziti will watch my back, isn't that right?"

"Absolutely!" Ziti bounced so fast she practically vibrated, but her movements caused the floor beneath my feet to shake. "Let's do it!"

I followed Ziti out of the dining hall, but I had to trot to match pace with her bounces. It was certainly a switch from when she had to hurry to keep up with Una and me. We came to the first rope bridge, and I hesitated on the edge. The holes between the wooden slats put the next step on the other side of a sickening drop to the ground, and I quickly realized I would have to jump it.

Ziti hopped from board to board like she'd done this a million times, but she probably had. This was my first time, though, so I took a running jump as I aimed for the next slat.

I slid onto the board with a sigh of relief, but I kept sliding, and I had to catch myself with my hands to stop my movement. My foot went over the edge, and the feeling of the air rushing up to greet my limb made my stomach flip.

“We should get you down into the clearing,” Ziti suggested as she jumped from board to board. “That way when you grow giant-sized, you won’t break anything.”

“I don’t think I’m going to get big,” I said.

“So, you really believe you’re the Dreamer?” Ziti paused to turn around and peer at me. “That would be amazing.”

“I returned to my normal size the last time I drank a potion,” I said as I clambered to my feet. Then I took another running jump for the next slat of the rope bridge, and I landed on my feet this time.

“Really?” Ziti gasped. “I’ve never seen anyone immune to the opposition effect before.”

“I suppose that means everyone is half-expecting me to become massive when this wears off, huh,” I said as I took aim at the next board.

“Many are afraid to hope,” Ziti said in a sad tone. “Too much time has passed.”

“I get that,” I sighed, but then I ran and jumped onto the next board.

A short while, and a few mild panic attacks, later, Ziti and I were on the other side of the rope bridge. I let out the breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding in, and I collapsed in an exhausted heap on the walkway.

"We cannot rest for long," Ziti said. "Others will be walking by soon, and we don't want them to knock us off the edge."

The furbae had a point, so I pushed myself to my feet once more. "That took forever, and it was incredibly dangerous. I can't believe you live like this every day."

"It's all I've ever known," the furbae squeaked, but then she started to bounce toward the main trunk of the giant sequoia the tree city was built into. "Let's get you down to the clearing."

The bouncing ball of fur led me through the precarious path toward the trunk, but my stomach dropped several levels when I stood before the stairs. It seemed an impossible task at my current size, but Ziti was already hopping down the steps. I had no choice but to follow after her the best I could, and I swung my arms in windmills as I jumped down to the next stair.

An eternity later, Ziti and I made it to the base of the tree, and I could have kissed the dirt, I was so happy to be on solid ground. The furbae

giggled as she watched me throw myself down, and she settled into a spot nearby until I caught my breath.

When I had somewhat recovered from the arduous task of coming downstairs, I pushed myself up into a sitting position and looked around.

The tall grass was like a humongous forest, and the stems towered far above my head out of sight. The small rocks around me resembled boulders, and the cracks in the dirt looked like craters. I felt like Thumbelina or one of the Borrowers, but in either case, I was really, really small. When I was ready for more exploring, I signaled to Ziti and headed out into the tall grass forest.

The bouncing furbae led the way, and she slid between the stems without any hesitation. I was a little slower as I followed behind her since I didn't know what animals out here would find a tiny human to be a delicious mid-day snack, but nothing jumped out of the grass at me, so we continued on for a while in silence.

Then, when the sound of birds grew distant, and I could no longer see the trunk of the sequoia behind us, I came to a halt. I didn't want to get lost out here, after all.

“So, what has your life been like, Ziti?” I asked in a curious tone.
“How old are you?”

“I am fully grown,” Ziti explained. “And my life has been pleasant at times, and terrifying at others. But I’ve grown accustomed to fear, and I’m not sure what I would feel without it.”

“I wish I could show you a life without fear,” I said. “But everyone has things they’re scared of.”

“Do they have nightmares where you’re from?” the furbae asked.

“Sort of.” I shrugged. “They usually stay in our heads, though.”

“They’re inside you!” Ziti gasped, and her eyes widened to an impossible degree. I could actually see her face at my current size, and it was a nice change from the faceless ball of hair I was used to.

“Only temporarily while sleeping,” I explained. “And they aren’t deadly like they are here.”

A strange pulling sensation in my arms distracted me, and I glanced down to see my limbs stretching outward at a brisk pace. The loin cloth covering my crotch became too tiny, and a moment later I was standing naked among the tall grasses.

“It was fun hanging out with you, Ziti,” I said as I began to grow back to my normal size, but I stood high above the bouncing ball of fur long before the words had completely left my mouth.

“It worked!” Ziti squealed, and she jumped up and down rapidly. “It worked, it worked, it worked! You’re the Dreamer!”

A joyful scream came from above my head, and I looked up to see Una hanging over the rails of a rope bridge. Her black hair blew in the wind, and even from this distance I could see the happiness written across her face. Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria stood at either side of her with shocked expressions, but they quickly pulled her backward before she fell over the edge.

I was grateful for their presence beside my feline companion, and I swallowed down the lump that rose in my throat at the sight of Una.

“By the Dreamer’s coming!” Mae gasped from where she stood a few paces away from the others. “You’re a you!”

“Come up here straight away!” Doctor Kria yelled from above. “I must inspect you for opposition!”

“I’m coming!” I called back, and then I reached down to scoop Ziti up into my hands. “And I’ll give you a lift to the top.”

“Thank you,” Ziti squeaked, and she nestled into my hands in what I could only equivocate with a hug.

Then I climbed back up the stairs at a run, and my member swung wildly with each step, but it was much easier at my normal size than it had

been while I was tiny. A moment later, I burst through the opening at the top, and I quickly crossed the distance to where Una and the others stood.

The cat-girl glanced down at my naked body, and a blush darkened her cheeks. She held my clothes in her arms, and she shoved them at me as a shit-eating grin spread across her face. “I brought your clothes.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I quickly pulled on the pants and vest-like tunic.

“You’re normal-sized.” Una’s purple eyes were bright with hope and adoration. “I knew I wasn’t being silly!”

“Y-You’re the Dreamer,” Miss Maggie gasped, and she placed both her hands over her heart. The pig-lady looked like she was about to faint, so I gestured toward the dining hall.

“Why don’t we go sit down?” I suggested.

“But... But...” Doctor Kria looked me up and down with an astute eye, and she didn’t seem to have been the least bit bothered by my nakedness, but I supposed people in the medical field were accustomed to bodies in all forms. “You look fine!”

“I feel fine,” I said, and I gave her a wide grin. “Why do you look so surprised? Una told you already.”

“Hearing and seeing are two different things,” Miss Maggie said, and she shook her head like she was trying to dispel a mirage.

“Y-Y-You’re the Dreamer,” Doctor Kria stammered out in a disbelieving tone. “It’s true. You’re the one who has come to save us all.”

“I told you so!” Una marched up to me with a proud grin. “You’re my savior, Alex, and I’ve known it since the moment we met.”

Then, to my utter and complete surprise, the cat-girl wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled my lips to hers. She tasted of salt and a hint of fish, but I didn’t mind. I pulled her into my arms, and I opened my mouth to her exploring tongue as she moaned into my mouth.

I was the Dreamer, and it looked like I was here to save the land from the reign of the Dark King. If that came with hot cat-girls jumping into my arms and kissing me, then I could handle anything.

Una broke free and gasped for air, but then a mischievous twinkle appeared in her purple eyes, and she took my hand in hers. “Follow me. I am fertile right now, and my body craves you.”

“Uhh, what?” My blood temperature rose instantly, and my palms began to sweat.

“I want to breed with you, Dreamer,” Una whispered as she batted her long eyelashes at me and smiled impossibly large.

I had to be dreaming.

And this time, I definitely did not want to wake up.

Chapter Eight

I accepted Una's hand, and then she urgently tugged me away from the crowd of onlookers. Her steps were eager, and her tail swished with excitement.

I was feeling the same exact emotions, so I couldn't blame her, but I cast an apologetic smile over my shoulder at the ladies as we departed.

"We'll be back!"

"Ooh, a mating ritual!" Mae clapped her hands together. "Good sport, you two!"

"Congratulations, Una!" Miss Maggie called in a surprisingly elated voice.

"Have fun!" Doctor Kria shouted at our departing backs, and she was waving her hand over her head like we were on a parade.

The approval of Una's two mother figures set my anxiety at ease, and I had a shit-eating grin on my face as I departed the rope bridge. The hoots and hollers of the other women rang in the background as I followed the beautiful cat-girl along the catwalks of Havenwood. Then Una led me to my dwelling, and she shot me flirtatious glances over her shoulder the entire trek. I was breathless by the time we arrived, but it wasn't from the walk.

I couldn't believe what was happening, and I was in a daze as Una slipped inside the squat hut, but I eagerly followed in her wake.

"Una," I said as I entered the one-room dwelling, but she cut me off with her lips on mine. Her salty taste was quickly becoming one of my favorite flavors, and I moaned as her tongue slid against mine.

I surrendered to the kiss as Una's fingers tangled in my shaggy black hair, and then my hands found the small of her back, so I pulled her against me with a swift tug. Una gasped, and the sound made me rock-hard instantly, but I took a deep steadying breath and reminded myself to slow down.

I wanted to savor this moment.

"Oh, Alex," Una sighed, and her hands roamed through my hair, across my shoulders, and down my arms. "I'm so glad everyone knows you're the Dreamer now! All-the-land is saved, and it's all thanks to you!"

"Don't get too ahead of yourself," I said, but it was hard to argue with her while her hands were exploring my body. Then her fingers dipped below my waistline, and I hissed in my breath, but when she started to drop to her knees, I grabbed her hand. "Una, wait."

This beautiful cat-girl had seen me naked more than once so far, and now it was my turn.

“You do not wish to experience pleasure with me?” Una’s purple eyes welled with emotion. “Don’t you want to make love with me?”

I took Una’s hands in mine, and I planted a gentle kiss on the back of each before I led her over to the low platform bed. I sat down, and then I pulled her down beside me. I could feel the warmth radiating from her, and six different emotions passed through her intense eyes.

“Let’s take our time,” I said. “What’s the rush?”

Relief flooded her gaze, and she threw her arms around my neck in a tight hug. I was lost in the feeling of her breasts pressing against my chest and the smell of her hair in my nose. I inhaled her aroma deeply, and I squeezed her warmly before I released her again.

“I am just so grateful you are here now, Alex,” Una murmured, and she hopped up onto all fours as her tail curled up toward the small of her back. “I’ve been waiting for you my whole life, and now you’re here. I want to show you how thankful I truly am. And as a woman, the best way I know how to do that is to make you a child.”

Fuck, she was sexy.

“Well... ummm, maybe we can get to know each other a bit better before we have children,” I chuckled.

“Yes, Alex,” she said as she batted her eyelashes at me again.

“Whatever you would like.”

“There are things I want to show you as well,” I said.

I reached up to cup her cheek with my right hand, and I leaned forward to graze my lips ever so softly against hers. A shudder of pleasure swept through the cat-girl, and she leaned her face into my hand with a sigh. I smiled into her beautiful purple depths as I gently rubbed my thumb against the corner of her lips.

“Fuck, you’re beautiful,” I murmured with an awed shake of my head.

“I cannot believe I waited so long to kiss you,” Una sighed, but she reached for the waistline of my pants once more. “I want to kiss you everywhere.”

“Hold on,” I laughed, but I stood up and turned toward her. Then I reached down and swooped her up into my arms only to gently toss her down on her back upon my bed. “It’s my turn first.”

The beautiful cat-girl bounced on the low, firm bed, and she blinked up at me in surprise, but she didn’t argue. Her white tunic was wrinkled already, and it was bunched up around her legs, so my first task was to remove it. I had to untie the leather belt cinched around her waist before I

could pull the white fabric over her head, but then Una laid before me wearing only a leather bikini-like set of underclothes.

The cat-girl's blue-and-purple stripes continued across the skin of her forearms and shins, but there it faded to a creamy hue that covered the rest of her body. Her stomach was lined with toned muscles, and her thighs looked deliciously soft. I wanted to taste her all over, but I didn't want to rush things.

We had all the time in the world to enjoy each other.

I laid down beside her, and the cat-girl instantly curled her legs up between mine. I groaned as I felt her warmth temptingly close to my crotch, and I couldn't resist the urge to pull her hips against mine, but she immediately began to grind on me.

Then Una's eyes widened. "Is that...?"

I could only assume she meant my cock, and I smirked as I nodded.

The cat-girl's purple gaze leapt to my crotch, and her tongue darted out to moisten her lips while her fingers tugged at my waistband once more. "I want to see."

"You first," I teased.

I wasn't self-conscious about my body by any means, but I was very eager to see what laid beneath the bikini-like leather triangles that hid her

glory from my sight.

Una gave me a wicked grin before she reached up to unfasten the straps at her neck, and a moment later, her shapely breasts were exposed for my viewing pleasure.

They were an ideal size and shape, and I imagined they would fit perfectly in my hands as well, so I reached forward to experiment. They felt amazing in my grasp, and I massaged them gently with both hands. The skin of her breasts had a lighter creamy hue to them than the rest of her slightly tanned body, but her nipples were a rosy pink, and they hardened beneath my fingers as Una moaned.

If she liked that, she'd love it when I actually tried to get her worked up, but for the moment, my main objective was to explore her strangely beautiful body

I wanted to find out what her nipples tasted like, so I bent my head down to flick my tongue across the hardened buds, and Una lifted her chest to push her breasts closer to me.

"Oh, Alexxxxxx." Her fingers leapt to my hair, and I could feel the tips of her claws as they pressed against my scalp. It was a surprisingly exhilarating sensation. My moans echoed the sounds escaping Una's lips

while her purple-blue tail curled around me, and the appendage caressed me with long fluid movements.

“You’re so fucking sexy,” I said as I pushed myself up onto my knees. “I want to discover every single inch of you, and the sounds you’re making... Fuck, Una.”

Then Una’s lips found mine again, and the kiss grew deeper and more passionate with each passing second. I nibbled on her bottom lip, which elicited purrs of pleasure from the foxy feline, and then I trailed my tongue along her jawline.

Goosebumps rose on her arms, and her fingers twitched toward my waistband once more, but this time I didn’t stop her. Una’s gaze leapt to my face with a questioning look, and I nodded.

The cat-girl grinned wide, and then her hand shot inside the baggy pants. Her fingers wrapped around my stiff member, and I hissed with pleasure. It was almost enough to make me cum right then and there, but I wasn’t about to let that happen.

Dreamer or not, this was my dream, and I would wait until the moment was right.

I wanted to hear Una moan some more before then, though, so I lowered my lips to her pert little nipples once more. They hardened against

my tongue instantly, and Una let out her own hiss of pleasure.

“Oh, Alex,” she breathed into my hair as her fingers tightened around my length. “This is incredible. I’ve never touched a man before...”

“You’re a virgin?” I sat upright and looked at her closely. I’d never taken someone’s virginity before. “Are you sure you’re ready?”

“I’ve been waiting for you my entire life,” Una repeated with an emphatic nod. “I am just surprised by your organ.”

“Why’s that?” I furrowed my brow with concern. Surprised was too ambiguous of a term for my comfort.

“It’s... I didn’t think they were so... well, large.” Una blushed, but then a flicker of doubt entered her violet eyes. “Maybe it’s an opposition effect of the tiny potion?”

“No, no, no,” I hurried to assure her. “This is the size it always is. You’re just getting me very excited, and that makes it grow.”

Part of me couldn’t believe I was explaining erections to a half-cat, half-girl babe, or that I was about to have her as my own for the first time. Another part of me felt like my entire life had been leading up to this moment, and that was the part I wanted to give in to.

“As long as you’re sure you’re okay,” Una said in a worried tone. “I don’t want to injure you.”

Oh, if she only knew how sturdy they were.

“I feel the same way,” I said, and I planted a soft kiss against her forehead. “This isn’t my first time, but if it’s yours, then I want to make sure it’s extra special.”

“You have already made me feel very special,” Una purred, and she stared up at me through hooded eyes. “To have the Dreamer choose me as his companion, can you imagine?”

“Uh, yeah, you’re super fucking hot,” I laughed. “I’ve wanted to kiss you since the day we met. Hell, I was half-tempted to kiss you before I saved you from the Sniffer Snatcher.”

“Truly?” Una’s eyes lit up with adoration, and she snuggled up against me even closer.

My hands caressed the exposed skin of her stomach, and I trailed my fingers up and down her arms as we spoke. Goosebumps rose in the wake of my digits, and I circled further south with each circuit. Una gasped in her breath every other second, and I could tell she was enjoying my slow, teasing, movements.

“Truth.” I nodded in confirmation, but then I gave her a wink. “I’ve had to force myself not to think about you constantly. I’m glad you made

the first move, to be honest, but fortunately for both of us, we waited until we were safe before having our fun.”

“I feel safe with you,” Una said, and she wiggled her hips against mine as her tail curled around her thigh. The striped appendage seemed to have a mind of its own, but it fit Una perfectly.

I stroked her tail for a moment, and a shudder of pleasure shot through her body. Then I let my fingers wander a little further south, and I ran my digits across the line of her leather panties. The strings attached it on each hip, and I gave Una a questioning glance as I lingered on the knots.

“Yes,” Una breathed, and her eyelids lowered ever so slightly.
“Please...”

That was all the urging I needed, and I hastily pulled at the ends of the knots with my right hand. I slid my left arm beneath the cat-girl’s body, and I used it to hold her still while I maneuvered the tie. The leather lashings slipped apart, and I tossed the straps to either side. Then I pushed myself up onto my left elbow so I could get a good look at the cat-girl’s mound of pleasure.

A happy trail of fuzz led from Una’s belly button to the black curls between her pale, creamy thighs, and I swept my fingers up and down her legs as I shot her a mischievous grin.

“It feels so good when you touch me,” Una sighed, and a shiver went through her body.

“Perfect.” I circled my fingers against her inner thighs, and then I teasingly drifted north ever so slightly until Una’s legs instinctively parted as her breath escaped her lips.

She wanted me to continue. Bad.

I bent my head down to her nipples again, and I circled the nub with my tongue while I circled her mound with my fingers.

“Yes...” Una gasped, and she arched her back as her legs spread even wider. “I am yours, Alex. I want you to fill me with your seed. I want you to be the first and only man I give myself to.”

I was a little stunned by her proclamation, but my cock twitched in response to the sincerity of her words. I knew she meant it, and that turned me on more than the words themselves. I took a deep breath to regain my composure, but I planted a firm kiss against her lips.

“You’re the best dream I’ve ever had,” I said as I stared deep into her violet orbs, but then I slid my finger beneath the black curls guarding her entrance, and her pupils dilated as her eyes widened. I swallowed her moan as it escaped her lips, and I drove my tongue and finger between each set of

lips at the same time. The walls of her pussy squeezed my digit as her tunnel pulsed, and I inhaled sharply. “Fuck, you’re sexy.”

“Sexy?” Una asked as her lips found my neck, and she began to lick, suck, and nibble on all the right places.

I could feel my cock throb in response as her fingers explored every inch of the exposed flesh of my shoulders, arms, and chest with frantic energy, but I was entirely distracted by the sensation of my fingers inside her, and my gaze stayed locked on the rise and fall of her chest.

“You are sexy,” I repeated. “It means... um, well, that I want to love you as much as possible. Everything about you turns me on.”

“You are sexy, too, then,” the cat-girl insisted in a serious tone.

“I can live with that,” I chuckled, but then I bent down to flick my tongue across her nipple while simultaneously working my finger in and out of her moist tunnel.

“Oh, my!” Una gasped, and her hips bucked upward toward the sensations I was causing deep inside her. “What is happening to me?”

“What does it feel like?” I had a pretty good idea already, but I was curious about how she would describe it. I loved listening to the odd way with words she had.

“Tingles...” Una murmured, and she closed her eyes as a shiver shot through her. “Shivers... Heat, deep inside...”

“I think that means you’re getting closer,” I said with a devilish smirk. “How does this feel?”

I circled my thumb against her clit, and the cat-girl gasped as her eyes went wide. Her hips bucked wildly, and it was all I could do to keep a hold of her, but her movements calmed after a moment.

“What magic is this?” Una murmured beneath lust-hooded eyes. “It feels... sooo... good...”

“The magic of chemistry, babe,” I chuckled, and I began to slowly thrust my finger in and out of her moist entrance while I flicked my tongue across her nipple again.

I licked and sucked on both of her nipples while I thrust my finger in and out of her, and every few strokes I rubbed her clit with my thumb. I blew hot breath against the rigid nubs on her breasts, and I nibbled on the curve of her breast as I plunged my digits inside her dripping wet pussy.

Una’s shivers grew in intensity until she was panting for breath, and she clung to me as the sensations coursed through her. Her eyes welled with emotion, and then she clamped them shut as her entire body began to shake.

The tension built and built until it finally burst, and she froze in place as a silent moan escaped her open lips.

“What... was... that?” The cat-girl gasped for air as she slowly regained control over her body, and a sheen of sweat covered her chest. Her ribs rose unevenly as she still struggled to catch her breath, but all I could think about was wondering what she tasted like.

“You came,” I explained. “On Earth, we call it a climax or an orgasm. I don’t know what you’d call it here.”

“I do not understand what just happened or how,” Una said with a confused look in her purple eyes. “But it was like I came alive for the first time. Thank you, Alex. I’ve always wondered what it was like to be with a man.”

“Oh, we are far from over,” I assured her with a shit-eating grin, and then I repositioned myself lower between her soft thighs. “Just wait until you see what else I can do to you.”

“You can do anything you want to me, Alex the Dreamer,” Una murmured, and she gazed down at me curiously as I spread her legs open.

“Good.” I flashed her a devilish grin, and then I dipped my tongue quickly into her well of pleasure and was rewarded with a loud gasp.

I pulled back immediately, and I trailed soft, delicate kisses along the flesh of her inner thigh as she calmed back down. I chuckled knowingly against her skin, and goosebumps erupted across the flesh of her legs.

I wanted to tease her until she was begging for me to fuck her.

“Why are you stopping?” Una asked with a hint of desperation entering her voice. “I liked it.”

“I could tell,” I said. “We’re taking our time, remember?”

“If that is what you wish...” Una fluttered her eyelashes over her lust-filled gaze.

Instead of replying, I dipped my mouth to her entrance, and I tickled the edges of her lips with my tongue until her legs opened slightly. Then I kissed her slowly and softly while I rubbed my fingers against her clit, and I could feel the warmth emanating from her entrance as her juices dripped out onto the blankets below her.

I licked her from bottom to top, with an extra firm flick against her clit as I passed it, and then I twirled my tongue around her node of pleasure and sucked. I continued the same procedure I’d used with my fingers, but my mouth caused much more intense reactions. I built up the tension bit by bit until she was thrashing against my face, but then her second orgasm

blasted through her like a rocket launching into space, and a guttural moan burst from her lips.

Her juices flowed from her dripping entrance, and I lapped them up with a voracious appetite for her flavor. She tasted sweet and creamy, and it reminded me of nectar from an exotic flower. I was like a bee buzzing around her petals, and I would happily pollinate her until the end of my days.

“Oh, Alex!” Una’s hands leapt to my hair, and her claws tangled in the tendrils as she pulled my face closer against her moist entrance. “Don’t stop!”

“As you wish,” I murmured against the sensitive skin of her thighs, but this time I reached up to twirl her nipples between my fingers as I licked her up and down.

The combination was more than she could bear, and the beautiful cat-girl began to shake as yet another orgasm took hold of her entire body. She was gasping for air, and her hair clung to her sweat-dappled forehead, but in my eyes, she had never been sexier. My cock pulsed with growing need, and I gripped it tightly as I came up to my knees.

“Are you sure you’re ready for this, Una?” I asked. I wanted to make sure she was one-hundred percent on board before I took things any further.

I was a gentleman, after all.

“Yes, Alex,” Una said in a voice husky with desire. “Please... I want... something... I feel a strong need to be as close to you as possible.”

“You want me to fuck you?” I asked, and I caressed her clit with my right thumb as I continued to stroke myself.

“What is that?” Una gasped out as her hips wiggled toward my digit. “Fuck?”

“It’s the best thing in the universe,” I said, and I leaned forward to rub the head of my dick against her moist entrance.

“Oh, my!” Una gasped, but her legs curled around my hips, which practically pulled my cock toward her dripping wet pussy.

I could feel her heat and wetness against the sensitive skin of my tip, and I hissed in my breath in an effort to hold onto my self-control. I wanted her to be out of her mind with desire, but I was getting close to that point myself.

When I couldn’t take it anymore, I leaned down to take her mouth with mine as I slowly slid the first inch of my cock between her moist lower lips. Una hissed, and I paused. I didn’t want to hurt her, but I knew the first time could be painful.

“We’ll go slow,” I said, and I pulled out again.

“I... I didn’t know it went... that deep,” Una said in a hesitant voice.

“Do you want to stop?” I asked, and I dreaded hearing her confirm my fear.

“Please, don’t!” Una gasped as her eyes locked with mine. “It’s okay, Alex. I’ve heard it will hurt, but you have already made me feel so good... Nothing could hurt me now.”

“Trust me.” I smirked. “The last thing I want to do is stop or go slow, but I know it will be better that way.”

“I’m ready, Alex,” Una murmured, and she tilted back her head to give me better access to her lips.

“Me, too,” I said, and I kissed her deeply as I pushed my tip between her lower lips again.

Una hissed again, and I paused, but then she nodded, so I pushed another inch inside her. I stroked in and out slowly, and she relaxed a little more with each thrust. Her tight pussy wrapped around my head and sucked it inward like she was urging me on, and it felt too warm, wet, and amazing for me to resist. Then the head of my cock rubbed against the barrier keeping her virginity intact, and I paused again.

“You feel so good, Una,” I breathed in her ear as I pulled back one more time.

“You do, t--” Una started to reply, but then I thrust inside her with a swift motion. I broke past the membrane protecting her maidenhood, and her mouth fell open as a moan emerged from her throat. Her claws dug into the skin of my back, and she pulled me closer with her legs, but she didn’t seem to be hurt at all, so I withdrew slightly and thrust again. “Ooooh, Alex!”

“Oh, Una,” I panted as her pussy pulsed around my shaft. She was tighter than anything I’d ever experienced before, and she felt like my fist, only better. “You feel fucking amazing.”

“I... agree!” The cat-girl’s breasts bounced up and down with each thrust, and they looked too delicious to ignore, so I bent down to suck on them while I fucked Una nice and slow.

I could feel my own climax growing steadily closer, but I wanted to feel her orgasm from the inside, so I wrapped my arms around her and buried my face in her neck while I pumped faster and faster. Una’s moans turned to screams of pleasure as I went deeper and deeper with each stroke, and then the head of my cock was rubbing against the back of her womb. I was buried to the hilt in her tight little pussy, and there was nowhere else I’d rather be.

Then I sensed the tension in her body beginning to build yet again, and I knew another climax was imminent. I craved the sensation of her

coming on my dick with an intensity I was unfamiliar with. I wanted to make Una come over and over again until we were both useless to the world.

“Alex, Alex, oh, Alex,” Una chanted my name as she cast her head all about, and her legs shook against my hips. “You’re amazing! Don’t stop!”

I could get used to hearing her say my name like that, and I smirked to myself as I continued to fuck the sexy feline. We clung to each other like nothing else in the universe existed, and I wouldn’t have cared if my life had ended after this one blissful encounter. With Una moaning my name in my ear, I could die a happy man.

I was getting closer and closer with each passing moment, and I grasped my self-control by a dangling thread. I was about to lose it, and then this wonderful moment would come to an end, but that was the last thing I wanted.

“By the Dreamer!” Una’s gasped as she came again, and a torrent of her juices bathed my cock, but the slippery warmth of her tunnel sent me completely over the edge.

“Oh, Una!” I pulled her close against me as the shiver of pleasure shot up from my balls and out the tip of my cock. I pumped inside her a few

more times as the sensation overpowered me.

“Yess!” Una practically screamed, and her legs wrapped tightly around my waist. She wasn’t letting me go anywhere, but there was nowhere else I’d rather be.

“Fuuuck,” I groaned as I sprayed a never-ending stream of my load deep inside her wet, tight pussy. More and more of my cum shot out of me as my body spasmed through the orgasm, but then I collapsed against Una’s chest. My breaths came in ragged pants, and my skin was drenched with sweat, but when I met her eyes, her gaze was full of adoration and awe.

“Is that what it will always be like?” Una asked in a breathless voice. “I had no idea it would feel so good.”

“It will be even better next time,” I assured her. “There won’t be any pain anymore.”

“I didn’t mind the pain,” Una said. “I’m filled with you. Ohh, Alex... it’s in my womb. I love how warm it is.”

I shifted my weight off her, but I wrapped my arms around her and pulled her close against me. I didn’t care if we were both sticky from our lovemaking, I wanted our sweat to mingle just like our other juices.

Una nuzzled her nose beneath my chin, and her ears tickled my nose, but I didn’t mind. She’d given me the most amazing sexual experience of

my lifetime, and I only hoped she could say the same about me. She didn't have anything to compare it to, but I preferred it that way.

"The most curious sensation is occurring within me," Una murmured in a confused voice. "It is like a heat and a tickle deep inside me. It's in a different spot in my tummy from where your warm seed is, and the only word that sounds right is 'love.' Does this mean I love you, Alex?"

My heart skipped a beat at her words, but I squeezed her tightly against me. "I certainly hope so, Una, because I think I'm falling in love with you, too."

The beautiful cat-girl purred loudly as she snuggled up against me, and the vibrations of her body rocked me into a brief slumber. I wasn't sure how long we laid like that, wrapped in each other's arms, but the sun was only a dim light through the open window when I woke up again. I gazed lovingly down at the woman beside me, and I let out a contented sigh.

I never wanted to wake up from this dream ever again.

I inhaled deeply, squeezed Una against me, and thought about the life I'd left behind on Earth.

I didn't have the best job, a lot of friends, or any family who lived super close. There wasn't anyone waiting for me to wake up, except maybe the hot delivery girl, but I had a feeling she would have dipped out as soon

as she woke up. There was nothing keeping me from staying in All-the-land forever, and I suddenly decided that's exactly what I wanted to do.

I roused Una with a gentle shake, and the cat-girl yawned wide as she stretched her arms over her head.

"I can't believe I fell asleep in the middle of the day," she murmured, and then she planted a sweet kiss on my lips. "Although, I could get used to seeing your face as soon as I open my eyes."

"Una," I said in a serious voice, and I took a deep breath. "I have decided to stay in All-the-land. I'm the Dreamer, and you girls need my help, so... can I live here in Havenwood with you?"

"Oh, Alex, yes, yes, yes!" Una hopped up onto all fours, and she bounced up and down on the mattress excitedly. "I have been hoping you would say such a thing since I first learned you are the Dreamer!"

Then she repositioned herself to where her ass was in my face and her head was hovering above my crotch, and she flashed me a devilish grin over her shoulder before she lowered her lips to the tip of my cock. Her tail flicked, and her round ass cheeks looked perfectly spankable, but before I could follow through on the urge, Una took my dick in her mouth.

"Oh, fuck," I hissed with pleasure, and my hand fell back to my side. "Oh, Una..."

Her lips encircled the tip of my cock, and she slowly lowered her mouth until I felt her hot breath against my balls, but then she pulled slowly back off again. She kept her fangs tucked safely away, and for that I was grateful, but her rough-edged tongue felt unusual as it slid up my shaft.

I'd never gotten a blowjob from a cat-girl before, and I had to admit, it was better than I would have imagined.

Una gagged on my length, and her back spasmed, but that caused some wondrous sensations to course through my entire body. I could easily have come in her mouth right then and there, but I wanted to explode inside her clenching, climaxing pussy instead, so I grabbed her by the hips. Then I picked her up, spun her around, and planted her across my hips facing me.

Una grinned wide as she slid down my shaft, and her face twisted into an agonized expression as she took in my full length, but then she began to bob up and down.

I didn't know where she'd learned her techniques since she'd been very much a virgin a few hours prior, but I wasn't going to complain.

We fucked a few more times until I didn't think I could come again even if I wanted to, and after several more hours of lovemaking, we finally decided to rejoin the others. Una winked as she pulled her white tunic over her head, but she didn't replace her underclothes, and I chuckled knowingly.

I was going to have so much fun with the innocent, curious, gorgeous cat-girl.

We walked hand-in-hand back to the dining hall, but the sound of celebration met my ears before we even arrived. Music and overlapping voices created a chorus of noise, and the sound grew steadily louder as we approached the circular structure.

“What’s going on?” I asked Una in a curious tone. “Some kind of party?”

“I would imagine so.” Una nodded. “We have been awaiting the coming of the Dreamer for a very long time now, Alex. The people of All-the-land have much to celebrate with you here.”

“Well, if it’s a party in my honor, then I should probably be there, huh?” I laughed.

“Most definitely.” Una grinned, and her pace increased.

The sun was setting in the distance, and the shadows of twilight crept into the edges of every building, but torches were lit at various intervals to light the rope bridges and catwalks. We entered the dining hall a few moments later to a chorus of cheers, and my neck flushed as I waved awkwardly at all the animal people chanting my name.

Miss Maggie strode forward with two mugs in her hand, and the pig-lady grinned as she shoved them into our fists. “You two are late.”

“We were fucking and breeding,” Una said with her chest puffed out in pride. We’d practiced the word a few times during our escapades, and she was incredibly proud of herself for using it correctly.

“Is that an earthling mating ritual?” Mae asked from where she stood with one foot on a bench like Captain Morgan on a bottle of rum, and she fixed me with a curious look as she took a long pull off her pipe.

“Yes!” Una nodded excitedly. “We mated multiple times.”

“We know,” Doctor Kria chuckled as she approached us. “We’ve been waiting, some of us patiently.”

The timid doctor shot Miss Maggie a glance, and the pig-chef shrugged.

“I was ready to drink.” Miss Maggie nodded at the mugs in our hands. “Catch up, you two. There’s more where that came from.”

“No one can out drink a Dodo,” Mae interjected. “Care to attempt such an endeavor?”

“What is it?” I asked as I lifted the cup tentatively to my lips.

“Giggle Juice,” Una informed me, and then she took a long swig of her beverage. She finished with a loud burp, and we all burst into laughter.

“It doesn’t always taste very good, but it will make you feel good.”

“Giggle Juice, huh?” I chuckled to myself at the descriptive name, and then I took a deep swallow of the fizzy beverage. It tingled against my tongue, and I could taste the alcohol in it instantly, but I wasn’t one to be left behind, so I drank heavily.

“Very good sport,” Mae observed with an approving nod, but then she emptied her mug in one big gulp. “Keep up the good work, and you may beat a Dodo someday. Not today, but a wondrous day, perhaps sometime after the defeat of the Dark King.”

“Is that so?” I giggled, and I gave the beautiful strange bird-woman a broad smile. “Perhaps today is that day.”

“Ah, the guest of honor,” Ziti squeaked in greeting as the furbae bounced up and down by my feet.

“There’s the cutie patootie.” I reached down to scoop up the adorable ball of fur, and I placed her gently on my shoulder. “Here, you’ll have a much better view from up there.”

“Oh, yes!” Ziti squealed with delight. “Thank you, Alex!”

“Don’t mention it,” I chuckled, and then I made my way toward my usual table with the women following me.

“Ahoy, Alex.” Mae wiggled her tail feathers as she situated herself on the other side of the furbae, and the Dodo-woman peered at me curiously. “You are awfully human.”

“Thanks?” I chuckled.

“You are most gracious,” Mae replied, and she tipped her hat to me.

We all sat down around the table with our mugs in hand, and I dipped my finger into my cup to drip some drops into the furbae’s mouth. Ziti sighed gratefully in my ear, and everyone laughed again.

“Drink up, Alex,” Miss Maggie urged with a broad grin. The pig-lady’s entire demeanor toward me had shifted, and gone were the calculating glances and stern stares. “You deserve to have some fun after getting us so many potions for the doctor’s research.”

I pulled heavily from the rim of my cup again, and then I tipped it over to reveal its emptiness. “Done.”

“Here...” Lena walked slowly toward our table, and in her hands were two overflowing mugs. “I... brought... you... another.”

I jumped up from the table, and Ziti nearly toppled off my shoulder, but she managed to hold on. Then I crossed the distance to the sloth-person, and I took the mugs from her hands.

“Climb aboard, beautiful,” I told the sloth with a wide smile. “Just call me the Alex train.”

Lena leaned forward, and she stretched out her arms in slow movements, but at long last, her hands managed to grasp the front of my shirt. Then she hauled herself up my person until she hung around my neck like a messenger bag.

I returned to the table with my friends in tow, and then we all drank happily for the rest of the evening. I was far beyond tipsy, and I giggled profusely, but I didn’t feel self-conscious about it in the slightest. Mainly because everyone else around me was also laughing hysterically, so my merriment just added to the chorus of joy.

It was late at night when the party started to wind down, and I was sitting alone at the table with Una. The beautiful cat-girl was telling me funny stories from her childhood, but very little of what she said made sense to me in my drunken state. She didn’t seem as affected by the Giggle Juice as I was, but maybe she had grown a higher tolerance for the substance. Eventually, her stories caught up to the current day, and she started to tell me about our earlier lovemaking.

Okay, she was totally drunk.

“I’m so glad you’re here to save All-the-land,” Una said in response to me asking if she wanted another drink. “How are you going to do it?”

“I’m not sure.” I shrugged. “Maybe we should start with your last mission and the recipe.”

“I have it here,” Una said as she reached into her white tunic, and she removed a folded piece of parchment. “See it for yourself.”

“Alright,” I said, and I unfolded the paper carefully. It looked old, and fragile, and one of the edges was torn like it had been ripped out of a book.

Written across the front of the paper were words in a strange language I couldn’t read, and at the bottom were some strange symbols. It didn’t look like anything from Earth, and I pointed to the text with a questioning look.

“What does it say?” I asked.

“This first section here is describing its use,” Una explained as she pointed to the writing at the very top. Two words were in a bigger font than the others, and I assumed it said “heal other.”

“What about this part?” I asked as my finger slid lower to the rows of strange words.

“Those are the ingredients needed,” Una said, and she tapped her finger against the first one. “See, it says the tail of a Sniffer Snatcher right here.”

“I can’t read this.” I shook my head. “But you said there’s part of it even you can’t read?”

“These symbols at the bottom,” Una said as she pointed to the strange shapes, and her ears flicked around in a curious manner. “Only the Potion Maker can translate them, and she is a prisoner of the Clover Queen.”

“So, what should we do?” I asked. “Isn’t this useless without her?”

“We have to save her,” Una insisted with an emphatic nod.

“I had a hard time taking out the Clover card men,” I pointed out. “I’ll need a lot more training and practice with my sword before I’d be able to manage a jailbreak, but in the meantime... We could gather the ingredients and have them ready for the Potion Maker’s return to Havenwood?”

“That way we would be ready to make the potion as soon as she arrived!” Una gasped, and she grasped my arm tightly as she bounced up and down. “Oh, Alex, yes! Let’s do it! Right now!”

Una's excitement was contagious, but it was the middle of the night, and we'd both been drinking for hours. Now was not the time to go gallivanting through the wilderness in search of weird items to use in a potion.

"How about first thing in the morning?" I suggested with a chuckle. "That way we're not too juiced up."

"Oh, and we can fuck again!" Una grinned. "I like that idea."

"Where are you going, Dreamer?" Miss Maggie asked with a goofy grin plastered on her face. "How can I help?"

"Yes, Dreamer, please tell us what to do," Doctor Kria said as she joined us at the table, and her mouse ears wiggled about.

"To the Dark King's black palace!" Mae declared, and she held her mug aloft like a victory flag, but then she let out a bubbly burp. "Together, we shall end his reign of terror once and for all!"

"Una and I are going to gather the ingredients for the 'heal other' potion," I informed my feline companion's mother figures. "Then once we have everything together, we will save the Potion Maker from the Clover Queen."

"And defeat the evil queen once and for all!" Ziti squeaked with an excited bounce.

“Maybe,” I chuckled.

“There is no B in ‘victory,’” Mae informed me, but I could tell she was too plastered to make any sense, but maybe she was just strange. I couldn’t tell if the bird-woman needed to be cut off from the Giggle Juice or if it was just her personality.

To be honest, I wasn’t sure how I was going to defeat the evil terrifying All-the-land, but I knew I was going to keep trying until I figured it out. The people were counting on me, and I wasn’t going to let them down.

“We leave in the morning,” Una explained. “I think it should just be the two of us. Any more people will only slow us down, and the faster we get the ingredients, the faster we can get Livia home.”

“Why, you need an adventurer on your side!” Mae interjected, and she turned wide, bloodshot eyes to the back of my tunic. “Someone to watch your back!”

The drunken bird-woman would certainly come in handy in normal circumstances, but I wasn’t sure if she would be in any shape to go anywhere tomorrow after how much of the Giggle Juice she’d drank already, and she still had a full mug in hand. While I thought about the advantages of bringing her with us, Mae finished off her mug in a few big

gulps, and her throat bobbed as the liquid disappeared. Then she burped loudly, and she went after more drinks without a word.

“If you encounter trouble...” Miss Maggie’s gaze turned stern. “Call for help. Don’t try to be brave and wind up dead.”

“Even if it made me a coward?” I asked with one lifted eyebrow.

“I’d rather the Dreamer be alive than dead,” the pig-lady huffed.

“I promise we’ll be careful,” I assured all the women surrounding me. “Besides, the first item is super simple. I already killed a Sniffer Snatcher, so all we have to do is go back to the Happy Fields and cut off its tail.”

“That calls for another round!” Una giggled, and she lifted her empty mug in the air.

“Hear, hear!” Mae called out, and she arrived at the table with her hands full of mugs. The Dodo-woman handed them out to the occupants, and then we all toasted with a clink, but Mae cleared her throat to get our attention once more. “A joyful evening with new friends and sights to see. I never in all my days would have thought the Dreamer would get a chance to meet me. It is truly an honor.”

“Agreed,” I said, and I clinked my mug against Mae’s for a second time. “I couldn’t have said it better myself.”

“Then do not attempt to do so,” Mae said with a dip of her head. “At least not until you can improve upon the prose.”

We continued to drink until the wee hours of the morning until Una and I were both yawning. We’d both exerted a lot of energy earlier in the day, so I bade goodnight to our friends, and I pulled her toward the door. Una was giggling and drunk, but while I expected Una to be stumbling back home with extra clumsiness, the beautiful cat-girl darted nimbly across the rope bridge ahead of me.

It was like she was magically healed from the opposition effects, and I wondered if it was a temporary drunken thing. Like how normal people became clumsier, she would do the opposite. There was no way to know for sure until she sobered up, so I put the thought out of my mind and focused on getting home.

Una came into my hut with me, and the two of us curled up in the low platform bed once more. This time, I made sure to cover us up with the blankets, and we snuggled in beneath the warmth of the covers. We were both asleep a few moments later, and I slept soundly until the sun was burning into my eyes.

Una yawned and stretched, and her tail stiffened during the process. I found everything about her to be completely adorable, and I was sure my eyes were heart-shaped as I watched her wake up for the first time.

“Good morning, beautiful,” I murmured as I nuzzled her ear. “Ready to conquer the day?”

“Is today the day you conquer?” Una’s eyes brightened. “Maybe I should wear my special tunic.”

“Wear whatever you want,” I chuckled. “I just meant we are going to kick ass today. We’ll get the Sniffer Snatcher tail and be back before lunch, watch.”

“It is quite a way to travel,” Una reminded me. “We wouldn’t make it back before dinner.”

“So, we’ll have to camp out tonight?” I scratched my chin as I thought it over. That changed things a little, but mainly just the time and energy we put into preparations. “We’ll need some camping gear.”

“Anything you wish.” Una nodded. “I will get some fish from the kitchen.”

“You and fish,” I chuckled. “It’s probably the only normal thing about you.”

“Is that good?” Una tilted her head to the side.

“Absolutely,” I assured her.

Then we made our way to the dining hall, and we ate a quick breakfast as we described to Miss Maggie what was needed for our

adventure. I wanted to be ready for anything, but I also didn't want us to be weighed down with too much stuff.

We packed up a small tent, a couple of blankets, fire starter, torches, and extra food. Doctor Kria insisted I take a few basic potions with me from the ones that still had labels, like "fast", "strong", and another "big", but I wasn't sure if I would even need them for this particular mission. Still, it was good to have them just in case, so I gave the doctor a grateful smile. Miss Maggie also provided me with a big pack to carry everything in, and then we were ready to go. A crowd of onlookers gathered on the rails of the rope bridges to wave us off, and I felt like a celebrity as I passed through the lines of animal people. Everyone reached out to touch me, tug on my shirt, or shake my hand vigorously, and it seemed like an eternity passed before we reached the main trunk of the giant sequoia.

I didn't see Mae, but I had a feeling the beautiful bird-woman was still sleeping off the effects of the Giggle Juice we'd all consumed by the barrel the night before.

Una and I waved goodbye before we headed in the direction of the waterfall, and we retraced the steps we'd taken the first time I'd come to Havenwood. Even though it had only been a couple of days, it seemed like I'd been in All-the-land for much longer than that.

I shot Una a flirtatious wink, and she licked her lips in response. I was having way too much fun with the beautiful babe to ever want to go back to my mundane life in Denver.

We traveled back through the waterfall, and then we headed into the woods where we'd been chased by the nightmare. I kept my sword out just in case, but I wasn't sure how efficient the weapon would be against the black-cloak-thing.

The two of us made it to the Happy Fields without incident right as the sun was setting, but the growing darkness made it very difficult to see. I took the lead since I remembered what Una said about the potions the Clover's had made her take, and I knew "night vision" had been one of them, so the cat-girl was handicapped in the shadows of night.

We lit the torches we'd brought with us and began to search for the body of the Sniffer Snatcher, and I heard the giggles of flowers beneath my feet as we trampled through the clearing where I'd first seen Una fighting off the dog-monster.

It felt like a lifetime ago, and I glanced around at the laughing flowers with an almost sentimental feeling, but then I heard Una gasp. She stood on the edge of the tree line, and her purple eyes were locked on a spot I couldn't see.

“It’s gone,” she said with a disappointed pout. “The Sniffer Snatcher is missing.”

I trotted over to stand by her side, and I looked down at the empty crater in the dirt. There were dig marks like a giant hand had scooped up the dog-monster, but I couldn’t remember picking it up again after I’d dropped the Sniffer Snatcher.

Something had taken our Sniffer Snatcher, and its tail went with it.

I didn’t know what we were going to do, but I knew we weren’t going to give up.

I was the Dreamer, and anything I imagined was possible.

Chapter Nine

If you'd like to see a map of All-the-Land, you can find it in my Facebook group (Search for Logan Jacobs in Facebook Groups), or on my Patreon (search Google for Patreon + Logan Jacobs).

“Let’s look around for some clues about where it could have gone,” I suggested to Una, and the beautiful cat-girl nodded in response.

I gripped the handle of my torch tightly in one hand, and I kept my free hand near my sword hilt just in case we ran into some trouble. If another Sniffer Snatcher popped out of the forest, I would be ready. I’d been unprepared during my first run-in with the dog-monster, and I wasn’t going to let that happen again.

Not if I could help it.

The two of us combed over the area surrounding the crater where I’d dropped the dog-monster a few days prior. I couldn’t believe it had already been multiple days since I’d first heard Una scream in the Happy Fields, but here we were, back at the scene of the crime.

I glanced around at the smiling trees, and I wondered if it was worth the effort to try to talk to them. They hadn’t been the most talkative the last

time I was there, but maybe they would be more willing to chat today.

“Hello,” I said with a friendly smile as I approached the tree closest to the crater. “Did you see anything around here recently?”

The smiling tree grinned a little wider, and its wooden eyes peered at me unblinkingly, but no words were offered up.

Maybe I hadn’t been loud enough?

I didn’t see any ears on the wooden trunk of what looked to be an oak tree, but that didn’t mean much in All-the-land. I decided to try one more time, so I cleared my throat.

“Alex, look!” Una suddenly gasped, so I gave up on talking to the tree and trotted over to her. She stood and pointed at a second crater in the ground roughly fifty paces away from the where the dog-monster had lain previously. “It’s a footprint!”

The crater was about ten feet long by four feet deep, and several rounded sections suggested toes on one end. The dirt around the edges cracked, and rocks tumbled into the hole as we peered down into the bottom.

Was it one of my footprints from my time as a giant?

I’d trampled through these woods for a while during my stint as a giant, and then I’d headed toward the distant mountain to the east, but this

print was going in the opposite direction. It was possible for it to be a mark I'd made, but the edges of this print were crisp and fresh. It had been made more recently than when I'd been here, so I decided it couldn't have been made by me, and the only explanation was another giant had been in the area.

"Una?" I furrowed my brow as I thought about all the clues we'd found so far. "Are there giants in All-the-land?"

"Of course." Una nodded. "Where else would they live?"

"I think that's what took the Sniffer Snatcher," I said. "Either that or someone who drank a Big potion. Are there any more tracks like this nearby?"

I turned a scrutinizing eye to the neighboring trees, and I noticed several snapped branches and torn leaves. Something had knocked the forest around a bit, and it had been very big. A giant seemed like the only possible explanation, even if it wasn't logical.

"I see another over there! What do you see with your human eyes, Alex?" Una asked with a tilt of her head, and she blinked into the torch light with large, dilated pupils. "Wait... I... I can see better... Alex! My vision has improved!"

"Are you sure?" I raised my eyebrows.

The sun had set long before, so I wasn't expecting her vision to be the best since she'd drunk a night vision potion while escaping the Clover fortress, and with the opposition effects still in full force, she should be practically blind.

"I... I think so?" Una shook her head and blinked a few more times, and then a broad grin slid across her face. "Yes, my sight has definitely improved, and so has my agility. I've been far less clumsy than usual ever since we... Alex, I think you are magic."

"What do you mean?" I frowned. "I'm the Dreamer, aren't I? Isn't that magic? What does that have to do with your side effects or your vision?"

"They're going away, Alex," Una said, and she reached for my hand. "My vision shouldn't be this good for weeks... I drank the two bottles' entire contents, so I should be still suffering from the effects for much, much longer."

"I don't understand." I shook my head.

"When you claimed my body... you gave me your seed, and I..." Una blushed, but her tongue darted out to lick her lips as her eyes grew earnest. "You saved me, Alex."

“That’s crazy,” I argued. “You’re basically saying my sperm healed you? That sounds crazy.”

“Totally bonkers,” Una agreed with an emphatic nod. “So, it makes utter sense, yes?”

“No!” I insisted, but Una flinched, so I took a deep breath, ran my fingers through my hair, and reached for her hands with an apologetic smile. “I’m sorry. I’m just a little... confused.”

“Your seed healed me, Alex,” Una repeated in a serious voice. “I have to tell the others! They’ll all want you to heal them, too.”

I imagined a veritable horde of animal-women hybrids swarming around me and fighting over who got my sperm first, and a shudder swept through my body. While I enjoyed having sex just as much as anyone else, being used for my sperm to that degree would be a little strange.

I finally regained my composure, and I met Una’s gaze. She bit her bottom lip, which caused her two sharp fangs to protrude over the edge, and I was overwhelmed with adoration for this wonderful, sexy cat-girl.

“Look, let’s wait until we get back to Havenwood to talk about it more,” I said in a much calmer voice. “We’ll get you checked out by the doctor, and she can figure out what’s going on with your side effects. We

should be grateful, though. This means you're getting back to normal, right?"

"Perhaps, but what do we do now?" Una asked, and her ears flattened against her head. "This place smells of dead Sniffer Snatchers."

"We should make camp," I suggested. "We aren't getting anything else done in this darkness."

"At least I can see more clearly despite the shadows," Una said in a cheerful tone, and she held her torch up high as she glanced around. "We should put some distance between us and the Happy Fields before we make camp. The air isn't safe here."

"Gotcha." I nodded. "Why don't you take the lead, and I'll watch your back?"

"Alright," Una said as she flashed me a wide smile over her shoulder. "Right this way."

The cat-girl's tail swished with a decisive air, and the hybrid hottie led me deeper into the forest away from the laughing flowers and smiling trees. We walked in silence for several moments, and then Una came to a halt. She examined the surrounding trees closely, but she nodded in satisfaction before she turned to me with another broad grin.

"This spot looks as good as any," Una announced. "I'll start a fire."

“I’ll set up the tent,” I offered.

Then the two of us got to work setting up our camp, and I began to whistle a cheerful tune under my breath. I’d had the Safety Dance song stuck in my head ever since I’d first arrived in Havenwood, and I wondered why. In any case, the sound of my whistles made the time pass by more swiftly, and the next thing I knew, Una had a roaring fire in the middle of a circle of stones, and I’d erected our temporary structure.

Una speared a fish on a stick, and then she placed the contraption with one end in the dirt and the other over the flames. I shook my head in amusement at her taste in food, but I offered her some of my bacon anyway. The cat-girl accepted it with a grin, and then she plopped herself down by my side as she munched happily away.

“So, you primarily eat fish, but you will also eat bacon?” I asked in a curious tone. “What else do you like?”

“Fish is my favorite.” Una nodded. “I came across a bacon tree on the run from the Clover fortress, so I had to fill my pouch with it just in case I couldn’t spare the time it would take to get fish.”

“You’ll eat them out of rivers and stuff?” I raised my eyebrows in surprise since she’d had such a negative reaction to my explanation about how bacon was made on Earth.

“Water, land, or air.” Una shrugged. “I do not care where the fish come from or what kind of fish it is. Perhaps someday I will encounter one I do not like, but so far that is untrue.”

“Fish only swim in water,” I pointed out as I shook my head. “There can’t be land or air fish.”

“You certainly are strange,” Una giggled. “Have you never seen a flying fish before?”

“Well, yeah, but they don’t actually fly,” I argued as I pictured the fish who jumped out of the water for a short amount of time.

“Sure they do,” Una said. “Why else would they be called such a thing?”

Were there actually flying fish in All-the-land? Now, that I had to see.

“I suppose that makes sense,” I said, even though I was definitely still confused, but I needed to see these flying creatures for myself before I believed they actually existed.

Still, I had to admit it was possible for something so crazy to exist in this wild world.

Una smiled as she snuggled up against my side, and I wrapped my arm around her shoulders. The fire warmed our chilled skin by the

deepening darkness, but being close to her made my body temperature grow even hotter. Her eyelashes fluttered over her large violet orbs, and then she peered up at me from beneath the fine hairs.

“Alex?” Una asked in a hesitant tone.

“Yes?” I replied as I rubbed her arm.

“Do you think we will succeed?” The cat-girl’s chin quivered. “Will the Dark King fall?”

“I can’t promise much,” I said. “But I’ll promise to try my best. I don’t want anything else to happen to you, Una, and I’m going to do everything in my power to save you, and the people of All-the-land, from the Dark King. I just don’t know how exactly yet...”

“We will think of something.” Una nodded emphatically. “You are not alone on this quest, Alex. I will be by your side every single step. That is my promise.”

“I had two ideas for tomorrow,” I started. “We can follow the trail of the Sniffer Snatcher stealer or go after a different ingredient. What do you think?”

“Either is fine with me.” Una grinned. “I’m just happy you are helping me gather the ingredients. Maybe my first solo mission wasn’t a complete failure. I did get the recipe, after all, and once you free the Potion

Maker, we'll be able to heal all the sick. Oh, Alex, whichever direction you lead in, I will follow."

"You're adorable," I chuckled. "I'm glad to be with you, too, and doing something productive. Who sent you on the solo mission, by the way?"

"No one sent me, I went myself," Una explained. "Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria argued against it at first, so I left in the middle of the night."

"They must have been worried sick!" I shook my head in awe at her bravery. "You're kinda crazy, you know that?"

"I believe you are growing accustomed to the way things are in All-the-land," Una observed, and her tail caressed my back with long gentle strokes. "What have you decided regarding our direction?"

"I don't know." I frowned. It was hard to choose between an unknown challenge and a possibly ravenous giant. "Maybe we should just go to sleep and figure it out in the morning."

"I am excited about sleeping beside you," Una breathed as her violet orbs widened. "It is almost as pleasant as the orgasms you gave me."

"Yeah, I enjoy it, too." I squeezed her against me with a shit-eating grin spread across my face. "I could seriously have died happy after making

love to you for the first time, but then I would have missed out on the second, third, and fourth times.”

“Let’s go to bed,” Una purred, and she nuzzled her head beneath my chin.

I scooped the petite cat-girl up into my arms, and I carried her the short distance to our temporary structure, but I had to get down on my knees before I could scoot below the entrance flaps. I crawled inside, placed Una down on the sleeping pad, and then turned around to tie the straps that held the door closed.

Once everything was taken care of, I positioned myself as the big spoon to Una’s little spoon, and the two of us sighed in blissful contentment. She fit perfectly next to me, and she wiggled her ass against my crotch, but I didn’t even have to instruct her to do that, she just did it of her own volition. That in itself was the amazing part.

Una the cat-girl was utterly perfect, and while I couldn’t have imagined her in my wildest dreams, here she was, in my arms, and I never wanted to be apart from her again.

I fell asleep with a huge grin plastered on my face and my arms tightly wrapped around my feline companion. We slept the rest of the night away without incident, and I woke to the sun’s rays warming the exterior of

the tent. I yawned and stretched, but my movements roused Una, and the cat-girl mimicked me a moment later with her own stretches.

“Good morning! How were your dreams, my Dreamer?” Una giggled at her own play on words, and then she started to rain kisses all over my face. “I dreamed about you. You were holding a wondrous sword made of shining, flashing metal, and you brought the light to the heart of the land. It was glorious!”

“Oh?” I chuckled as I received her numerous signs of affection, and I could have endured the attention for hours, but we had a mission to complete, so we’d best be leaving soon. Still, Una made me realize something I hadn’t thought about before. “I don’t think I dream while I’m here...”

“Everyone dreams,” Una said, and she fixed me with a concerned look. “Being the Dreamer must be very odd.”

“More so than you would ever understand fully,” I said with a wry smirk. “But that’s neither here nor there. Let’s see that recipe again before we decide our next step.”

“I’ll heat up some food first,” Una suggested. “No point in thinking when your stomach is empty.”

“Perfect.” I planted a kiss on her adorable little nose, and she purred as she rubbed her face against mine.

A short while later, the two of us sat with food in hand, and the recipe was spread out across the ground before us. I munched on some warm bacon and a travel biscuit while I gazed at the strange writing like I could understand it, and Una licked her lips happily before she continued the translation.

“The next ingredient is the wings of a batbee,” Una informed me.

“What are they like?” I asked. “Is it going to be difficult to get the wings from them?”

“Batbees are what they are.” Una shrugged. “Fast, devious, little stingers who come out in the shadows of night to feast upon the two-lips’ sweet juices. They are usually harmless, unless one bothers them, and then they swarm with their massive needles.”

“Glorious,” I breathed as my eyes widened. “So, they’re exactly what they sound like, a mixture of bats and bees?”

Una tilted her head to the side and furrowed her eyebrows. “What are bats and bees?”

“A bat is a flying creature that comes out at night to eat insects and pollen from flowers,” I explained. “A bee is a tiny insect with a stinger.”

“Earth sounds so strange,” Una said with an awed shake of her head.

“You’re kidding me, right?” I tossed back my head and laughed.

“All-the-land is completely and quite literally insanity embodied, and you think Earth sounds strange.”

“I suppose being the Dreamer must be even stranger,” Una observed.

“To know both worlds at the same time.”

“It’s taking me some getting used to,” I reminded her with a sideways smile. “But I think I like All-the-land a lot better than Earth. I mean, you’re here, after all.”

Una grinned knowingly, but she didn’t comment, and then her violet gaze returned to the parchment before us. “After the wings of a batbee, it says we need talking tree sap.”

“Do the trees here ever talk?” I asked as I glanced around at the forest of smiling trees where we’d camped, but they just eyed us silently.

“I believe it is referring to a specific tree,” Una explained, and she stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth and scrunched up her nose in concentration. “I remember a story about the Talking Tree, but I’d have to ask the others for more information. I don’t remember enough details to take you to it.”

“That’s alright,” I said with a bright smile. “Let’s just get the wings of a batbee next, then. We can figure out the rest of it later, but no reason to let our entire trip be a waste of time.”

“No time spent with you is wasted,” Una assured me as she bumped her shoulder against mine. “But I agree with your plan.”

“Great.” I grinned. “So, we’ll go to the field of tulips you mentioned. I’m surprised there’s normal flowers here, too.”

“All the flowers in All-the-land are normal,” Una argued.

“Well, maybe to you,” I countered. “But where I come from the flowers don’t giggle or have faces. It’ll be nice to see some basic tulips for a change.”

“You have two-lips on Earth?” Una’s eyes lit up with excitement. “What songs do they sing?”

Oh, boy.

I’d totally heard her pronounce the name of the flower wrong. Una was probably talking about something incredibly strange, and then I suddenly pictured lips on stems.

“Are you saying ‘tulips’ or ‘two-lips’?” I asked.

“Two-lips. They look like this.” Then Una pointed to her mouth, but that confirmed my theory. “They sing the most beautiful songs, Alex.”

“I can’t wait to see them with my own eyes,” I said with a wry smirk.

We finished our food, and then we packed up our small camp. Una took the lead again, and I followed happily behind her while watching her tail swish back and forth. We walked for a while in comfortable silence, and I gazed around at the landscape as we traversed the forest full of smiling trees. We passed by a few more foot-shaped craters in the ground, and by the time we came to the third one, I realized we were going in the same direction.

“Una,” I said as I pulled her to a halt beside the hole in the dirt.

“Look, it’s another giant footprint. Whoever took the Sniffer Snatcher went this way.”

“That’s wonderful!” Una gasped, and she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. “We will be able to go after both ingredients at the same time!”

“Exactly,” I said. “Two birds with one stone.”

“Let’s hurry!” Una grabbed my hand and began to pull me forward.

“Maybe we can catch up to them.”

While I wanted to help her get all the ingredients needed to make the “heal other” potion, I wasn’t exactly eager to run into a giant. I wasn’t sure

what I would do if we did catch up to the Sniffer Snatcher thief, but I would cross that bridge when I came to it.

I still had a few tricks up my sleeve in the form of potions, so I had nothing to worry about.

I chuckled as I allowed Una to pull me through the forest, but she slowed to a normal pace after a short while, and I held her hand in mine as we continued onward. I ran my fingers across the tuft of fur at her wrist as we walked, and Una flashed me a sideways grin.

“You make me feel very strange things, Alex,” Una informed me.

“Same,” I replied. “Let’s just roll with it.”

“I’d much prefer to stay on my feet,” Una countered.

I shook my head in amusement. “I just meant we should relax and let things unfold as they will.”

“No time to relax, Alex,” Una said with a lift of her chin. “We must save All-the-land first.”

“Why can’t we do both?” I chuckled.

“I suppose we could.” Una’s brow furrowed as she thought it over.

“You are very powerful, so perhaps it will be easier for you.”

We continued to follow the tracks of the giant as we made our way to the field of two-lips, and the sun made a steady trek across the rainbow sky.

We didn't halt again for several hours, and then we only paused briefly to munch on some snacks before we kept going again.

Then the landscape began to slowly shift, and the forest floor grew dryer and dryer. The trees became less numerous, and wide-open spaces replaced the underbrush. I started to spot some odd-looking cacti and other desert plants scattered across the ground, and I had to look twice to confirm my first suspicion.

Sure enough, the cactus I peered at resembled a large, bulbous penis, complete with two smaller cacti protruding from the stem like testicles. I snorted in amusement, and Una shot me a curious glance.

"It looks funny," was all I could say around the chortles rising up my throat. "Like a..."

I gestured to my crotch and then back to the cactus, but Una's confusion only seemed to grow.

"It's a cuckold," Una explained with a tilt of her head. "That's how they grow."

"Never mind," I snickered, and the beautiful cat-girl shrugged before she continued onward.

The suggestive cacti grew more numerous as we left the shade of the trees and entered an open desert-like landscape. Flowers joined the

succulents, and some resembled the aromatic, open lips of a vagina while others had a distinctly boob-like appearance.

My amusement grew in strength with each passing plant, and I started to giggle uncontrollably when I spotted one that looked like a butt.

“What is it?” Una asked.

“The plants,” I said in a breathless voice. “They’re so funny-looking. I want to know what they’re all called. Where did they come from? Is this normal?”

I gestured to a flower with a giant clit-looking thing blooming from between the petals, but Una only looked even more confused.

“The vagibloom?” Una asked. “What’s so funny about it?”

“Una,” I said as I swallowed my laughter. “Una, seriously, it looks like a vagina.”

“A... vagina?” Una tilted her head to the other side.

I pointed to the place where her legs met, and then her violet orbs widened with sudden realization. The cat-girl peered around at the plants and succulents with newfound perspective, and she began to giggle uncontrollably.

“It does!” she gasped between fits of laughter. “It really does look like... well, me. I never noticed before...”

The blue-purple cat-girl laughed so hard she fell to the ground and began to roll around in fits while she held both hands over her stomach. She narrowly missed the spines of a nearby succulent, and then she hopped nimbly to her feet again as she attempted to catch her breath.

I was impressed with her nimble grace, and I wondered if what she'd said was true.

Did I have magic sperm?

"You have opened my eyes, Alex," Una said, and she sucked in her breath before another fit of laughter overpowered her.

"I'm happy to have been of service," I said as I flourished down into a deep bow. "Carry on, beautiful."

We walked a little further as I pointed to each plant, and Una explained the names for every one as we roared with laughter. It was slow going, but I didn't care. I couldn't remember the last time I laughed so hard, and that included the night of the Giggle Juice celebration.

"This one?" I requested with a red face as I pointed to a small shrub with what looked like testicles hanging from it, complete with a spattering of peach fuzz.

"Peninuts," Una said.

“Bwahaha,” I cackled like a twelve-year-old boy, and Una watched me with amusement. Then I regained my composure long enough to point to another. “Okay, this one?”

“That is a hornydog,” Una said, and a wry smirk stretched one corner of her lips up. “It is said if you eat the fruit, then you will want to mate for days.”

“So, it’s like plant Viagra?” I snorted.

“What is Viagra?” Una asked.

“It’s a pill, which is kind of like a potion, but it makes your dick hard for hours.” I grinned. “I suppose All-the-land and Earth aren’t so different after all.”

“A peeell,” Una said slowly as her ears flattened against her head. “Do they come with opposition effects as well?”

“Sort of.” I shrugged. “Everything has pros and cons, even on Earth.”

A cloud passed overhead, and Una’s eyes leapt to the rainbow sky. The cat-girl peered closely at the sun’s swift progress toward the western horizon, and then she began to pull me down the trail again.

“Let us hurry,” Una said, and she took my hand in hers. “We must get to the field of two-lips before the sun sets.”

I quickened my pace to match hers, and the two of us raced across the desert scene. I couldn't see any fields of flowers anywhere, but I trusted the beautiful cat-girl to lead me in the right direction. I noticed several more giant footprints as we crossed the landscape, but we didn't slow down to inspect them. They were still headed in the same direction as we were, so it would be simple enough to continue the trail once we acquired the wings of a batbee.

All-the-land seemed never ending, and the more I explored, the more I realized how much more there was to learn about this wild dream land. No one from Earth would believe me if I ever got the chance to tell them about what I'd experienced so far, but I didn't know if I would care. It was like this world was made specifically for me, and I was happy with that.

Now, I just needed to remove the looming threat of the Dark King so I could enjoy the playground I'd somehow woken up in. First, though, I would help Una create her potion, and then I would use my special immunity to help the people of All-the-land face off against the evil overlord and his teeming minions.

I was the Dreamer, and I wasn't going to let a few nightmares ruin my fun even if it meant I had to be the one to end the reign of terror of some faceless evil.

I knew I could do it, though.

Anything I imagined was possible in All-the-land.

Chapter Ten

I was surprised by my own sense of determination, but I supposed that came with the territory of accepting I was the Dreamer foretold by some mysterious prophecy. There were worse things. I could have the soul of an evil sorcerer linked intrinsically with my own, or be peer pressured into walking straight into the volcanic depths of Mount Doom.

I straightened my shoulders as we continued our trek across the vibrantly colorful landscape, but we reached the field of two-lips a little while later, and it was just as Una said. The petals folded away from the center in distinct lip shapes, and the luscious bloom released a pungent, bad-breath-like odor.

“Interesting,” I murmured as I bent down to inspect the flowers.

They grew in a variety of colors ranging from a deep, velvety purple to a pale orange, and everything in between. The smell wasn’t the most pleasant, but then I caught a hint of something minty from a nearby bud. Apparently, some of them had brushed their teeth recently.

Una and I walked into the center of the field of two-lips before we stopped to spread out our sleeping pad across the ground. Then the two of us sat cross-legged side by side and watched the sun finish its descent toward the western horizon. The rainbow color sky shifted, and the hues

slowly changed to darker shades, but then the rays of the sun cut through the air with a final rebellious illumination.

Darkness began to creep along the edges of the field, and a short while later, I heard the sounds of insects and frogs echoing across the distance. I could barely make out the sound of running water somewhere nearby, and everything was still and calm.

“This is nice,” I said. “I haven’t stopped to smell the two-lips in a while. This must be what my boss was talking about when he said he wanted me to relax.”

“What is a ‘boss’?” Una questioned with a curious tilt of her head.

“Someone who can tell you what to do,” I explained. “Back in Denver, my boss was pretty much the only person I knew. I just moved to town, so I hadn’t made any new friends yet.”

“Where did you come from, Alex?” Una asked. The cat-girl’s humongous violet orbs stared into mine, and her curiosity was obvious. “Do you have a family?”

“I was born in a small Midwestern town,” I informed her, and my smile turned bittersweet. “No one’s ever heard of it, so I wouldn’t expect you to.”

“I’ve never even heard of Earth before,” Una reminded me. “What’s a ‘midwestern?’”

“It’s an area of land,” I said, and I scratched my chin as I tried to think of an example she’d understand. “Like how there’s the Happy Fields and the mushroom forest.”

“What kind of things grow in the Midwestern?” Una asked as she plucked a minty smelling two-lip and placed it in her shaggy black locks. “Any cuckolds or vagiblooms?”

“You’d say ‘Midwest’ in that context,” I corrected. “And normal plants I suppose. They’d probably look awfully strange to you, though.”

“Maybe,” Una giggled.

“What about you?” I asked. “What’s your family like? Did you have a lot of brothers and sisters? Or were you raised by Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria?”

“That’s a lot of questions,” Una teased, and I realized we’d both picked up on some of the other’s speech habits. “I was born to a father and a mother, and yes, I had a lot of sisters growing up.”

“Where are they?” I pressed. “How come they’re not in Havenwood?”

Una sighed. “Because of the Dark King.”

“Oh, I’m sorry,” I said, and I reached across the distance between us to squeeze her hand affectionately. “You don’t have to talk about it if it hurts too much.”

“It’s alright, Alex,” Una said as her eyes filled with emotion. “It does hurt, but I am getting stronger and stronger every day, and I found you! You’ll defeat the Dark King once and for all, and maybe I will be reunited with my family, then.”

No wonder Una was so anxious to find the Dreamer and aide in his victory over the ominous king of darkness.

“Are they... alive?” I didn’t know of a nicer way to ask the question, but I tensed in preparation for tears.

“I believe so.” Una nodded, but the expression was rife with sadness. “But I do not know for sure. The last I heard, my father was a prisoner of the Clover Queen, but he wasn’t there when I went to save him and the others.”

“Oh, Una,” I sighed in sympathy for the courageous feline hybrid. “I had no idea.”

“Of course not,” Una said. “I hadn’t told you yet. Had I?”

“No,” I chuckled. “But what about your mom?”

I had to admit I was a little relieved I wouldn't have to face some angry cat-dad any time soon since I was certain any father wouldn't take kindly to a man claiming his daughter as his mate. Still, I realized I'd eventually have to face Una's father, but I imagined saving him from the jaws of darkness would make a good first impression.

While All-the-land was starting to grow on me, and I found myself daydreaming about spending my life here with Una as my mate, Mae's beautiful face often flashed through my mind. I found myself wondering about what the traveling Dodo-woman had experienced, and I could listen to her sing-song voice for hours without pause. It would be awesome if I could have more than one girl in my life, but in any case, I would be happy to have Una in my life, and in my bed, for the rest of my days, so I suppose I might as well make it official eventually.

"When the Dark King first arrived in All-the-land," Una said in a voice drenched with pain, and I was pulled out of my thoughts. "His minions swept through every town and village, and they took all of the most beautiful women back to the Dark King. My mother was one of them. My sisters and I were only kittens, and we mewed for her for days straight."

"That's horrible," I said with a sad shake of my head. "What did your father do?"

“What any loving husband would do.” Una shrugged. “He drank six potions at once, and then he went to confront the terror who’d torn our home asunder.”

A shiver of dread shot up my spine, and I shivered in the growing darkness. The air temperature had dropped several degrees while we’d been sitting there, and the sleeveless vest-tunic I wore did little to protect my arms from the chill.

“Then what happened?” I had a feeling I knew where the story was going, but I needed to hear it from Una.

“He failed, but the Dark King let him return home.” Una’s purple eyes were dark as she relived the bitter memory. “My father tried time and time again, but the Dark King only made him look like a fool each and every time. He was withered by the opposition effects, his cravings were out of control, and yet he’d still get up each day swearing he’d defeat the Dark King before sunset.”

“Didn’t he know about the prophecy of the Dreamer’s coming?” I asked. “Surely it was well-known even then?”

“My father didn’t care,” Una explained. “He was consumed with anger and hatred. No other thoughts entered his head besides how to destroy what had destroyed him. After a while, he grew too weak to even lift a

finger against the Dark King, and that is when he fell victim to the Queen of Clovers.”

“When did he get captured?” I asked as I began to piece together the entire picture. Una’s earnest urgency, her insistence on me saving the entire land, and her child-like innocence all made much more sense to me after hearing about her life.

“During the last full moon,” Una said, and then her eyes leapt to the sky again. “Oh, yes, I almost forgot about the batbees!”

The sun was gone from the darkened rainbow sky, but the moon still hadn’t risen. I was hesitant to light a torch in case it scared off the very creatures we sought, but it was getting harder and harder to see around the field. Una peered around at the sky, and then she pointed to the eastern horizon.

“Look, Alex, the moon is finally rising!” Una exclaimed, and she leapt to her feet in a single graceful bound.

I stared at the eastern horizon for several moments, but I saw no celestial orb. Perhaps her vision had improved to the point where it surpassed my own, but this thought merely reminded me of the potential for my sperm to be magic, and I shook my head to dispel the slew of questions that thought brought along with it.

“I don’t see it,” I said. “What does the moon in All-the-land look like?”

Before the cat-girl could respond, however, the bright, glowing neon-green sphere rose above the distant tree line like a tennis ball arching over a net.

“What. The. Fuck.” My mouth fell open as I gaped at the full moon. I couldn’t believe I hadn’t noticed the green hue of the cosmic circle.

All-the-land was so fucking weird, but it was awesome.

“What’s wrong, Alex?” Una asked with a worried frown.

“I have never seen such a strange-looking moon before,” I explained. “Has it always been green?”

“I believe so.” Una nodded. “As long as I can remember. What other color would it be?”

“Yellowish-white?” I shrugged. “That’s what color the moon is like on Earth, anyway.”

“We aren’t on Earth, Alex,” Una pointed out in a patient tone. “Why would they be the same?”

“You’re right,” I chuckled. “It just caught me by surprise... I take it the batbees will be coming out soon, too?”

“They will bask beneath the light of the moon, yes,” Una said, and she reached out a hand to pull me to my feet. “We should be prepared for anything.”

“Gotcha.” I withdrew my sword and peered around the field of two-lips. “What’s anything?”

“Well,” Una said in a thoughtful voice. “There’s the batbees, a giant roaming the area, and possibly more Sniffer Snatchers. Of course, nightmares are always a possibility, and we are technically in Clover territory, so we could run into a few of them. Which would you prefer, Alex?”

“Let’s just stick with the batbees if possible,” I said. “But I wouldn’t argue with the Sniffer Snatcher thief showing up to share the beast’s tail with us.”

“Perhaps if you concentrate, you can make it so,” Una suggested. “You are the Dreamer, but I am not sure what that means. Do you have special powers? Besides being able to heal me with your... you know. Oh! And the potions, of course.”

“We still aren’t sure that’s what is happening,” I cautioned. “We shouldn’t make assumptions before we have all the information.”

“Alright,” Una said with a dip of her head. “I will follow your lead, Alex. I don’t understand why you get so jittery when I bring it up, though...”

“One thing at a time,” I requested. “I just accepted I am the Dreamer, after all. I still don’t know what that means, either, but we will figure it out together.”

“But we will save my father and the Potion Maker, right?” Una asked with an earnest expression in her purple eyes. “You haven’t changed your mind?”

“No, Una,” I assured her. “I made a promise. We will save your dad and anyone else captured by the Clover Queen.”

Una opened her mouth to respond, but before she could, a buzzing sound zipped past my ear, and a large shadow swept past my peripheral vision.

I spun around, and my mouth fell open when I saw the gigantic leathery winged yellow-black insect. It was the size of a football, and even from a distance, the four-inch stinger was easy to spot. I saw countless eyes peering out of its head as the bug zoomed past me, and then it spiraled into the sky, but it moved faster than I could track, so I lost it an instant later.

“Was that...?” I asked as I turned to Una.

“A batbee!” Una gasped. “Be careful, Alex, the stingers are very painful.”

“I can imagine.” I swallowed hard as I considered the literal dagger at the tail end of the insect. “I’ll be careful, I promise.”

I could make promises all day, but there wasn’t much I’d be able to do against a bug of that size, and a shudder swept through my body.

“We have to get its wings somehow,” Una reminded me, but I was already brainstorming ways of catching the flying football-dagger.

I wished I had a net with me, but we didn’t have time to craft one out of the rope I’d brought.

I scanned the field of two-lips through narrowed eyes, but I couldn’t see the batbee anywhere. Then I heard distant buzzing, and I turned in the direction of the sound to see a swarm of the striped insects flying toward us. They zoomed past in a blur of motion, but with so many so close together, they formed a cloud in the sky that was much easier to follow through the air.

They were fast as fuck.

I watched the batbees hover over the multitude of two-lips while the neon-green moon rose higher in the sky, and the light of the celestial orb turned the rainbow sky into some trippy swirls of color. Then the bugs

zipped from bloom to bloom, and the pollen glowed iridescent beneath the lunar light.

“Let’s go!” I shouted before I dashed toward the horde of batbees, and I aimed for one paused above a two-lip less than twenty paces away from me.

“Woohoo!” Una cheered as she chased behind me, and she hopped nimbly over flowers as she crossed the distance to a batbee.

We ran as fast as we could toward the possibly murderous horde of insects, and the buzzing in my ears drowned out all other sounds. I jumped at the batbee closest to me, and I crashed down into the dirt, but I came up empty-handed.

Una lunged into the air after another insect, and she landed gracefully on all fours, but she didn’t manage to snag one of the fast-flying creatures.

“This is tough,” I sighed. “They’re too fast.”

Una gave me a small smile. “I’m sorry I could not catch one, either. They are incredibly fast.”

“Fuck,” I huffed. “How are we supposed to catch something like that?”

“Don’t forget,” Una said as her face brightened, and she tapped me on the shoulder where the shoulder strap for my pack rested. “We brought a

few potions with us to help on our quest. You're the Dreamer, so it won't hurt you to drink some."

"Oh, yeah." I slung the bag off my shoulder, and I opened the flap at the top to dig inside. Una peered over my shoulder curiously, and a moment later, I removed the red, sparkling potion labeled "fast" and popped the cork off the top. "Here goes nothing."

I was grateful some of the potions with labels were useful, but the mouse-doctor had rifled through the entire selection, and she only found a handful with words written on them. Of the handful labeled, only a few had badass effects like fast or big. Still, I had what I needed to get the job done.

"I believe in you, Alex," Una said in an earnest tone. "You're the Dreamer, anything you imagine is possible in All-the-land. You can do this!"

"Thank you for the vote of confidence," I said with a dip of my head, and then I tipped the bottle up to allow the contents to slide between my lips. I swallowed down a swig of the elixir, and then I shook my head to dispel the residual tangy taste on my tongue.

A shiver ran down my spine, and a tingling sensation bubbled in my gut, but I let out a loud burp before I replaced the cork in the bottle's

opening. I placed the half-full potion gently back among my other supplies, and then I slung the pack over my shoulder once more.

“How do you feel?” Una asked with raised eyebrows. “Are you feeling fast?”

“I think it needs a second to start working,” I said with a shake of my head, but suddenly the motion sped up until I was whipping my head back and forth faster than light. “Uh, yes, it’s working.”

A shit-eating grin spread across my face as I took off running through the field of two-lips, and the wind stung my face as I dashed around at the speed of light. I circled the field twice in as many breaths, and then I skidded to a halt beside the stunned cat-girl, which left deep rivulets in the dirt from where I slid.

“I couldn’t even see you!” Una gasped. “You’re moving so fast!”

“I suppose that’s what a fast potion should do,” I teased with a wink, but then I took off running again.

The feeling of the ground moving beneath my feet at blinding speed was so exhilarating, I didn’t want to stop, but after a few more circuits of the field beneath the neon moon, I reminded myself of the mission we were here to accomplish. Then I turned back to the horde of batbees, and to my utter amazement, they appeared to float through the air in slow motion.

I could easily make out the details on their segmented bodies, and their antennae quivered nervously as I ran in circles closer and closer to them. The countless eyes blinked up at me as the insects hovered above the multi-colored petals of the two-lips, but none of them made a move to attack me.

It was time to complete the mission, so I targeted one of the batbees that appeared to move even slower than the rest, and I dashed toward it at lightning speed. The batbee buzzed loudly and darted away from me, but it was a simple matter to catch up to it, and I plucked it from the air with a broad grin stretched across my face.

Potions were fucking awesome.

I held the batbee proudly over my head as I trotted back to where Una stood staring in amazement at my blinding speed, but the instant I slowed down, the wings of the insect flitted so quickly that it nearly lifted me into the air. I held onto either side of its middle segment firmly, and I brought the struggling bug down from the air to present to Una.

“Your batbee, darling,” I announced with the grin still plastered on my face. My hair was jutting out at wild angles from being blown in the breeze, and my face felt flushed from the stinging force of the wind, but I didn’t give a shit. I was high on the adrenaline rush, and nothing could ruin my happiness.

“Oh, Alex, that was amazing!” Una gushed as she clapped her hands with delight. “You made it look so easy and simple!”

“Alright, alright,” I chuckled. “Let’s get these wings off already.”

Una nodded decisively, and then she reached out and grasped one of the large, leathery, flapping appendages with one hand while she pressed into the center of the bug’s back with the other. Then she yanked backward on the wing, and the buzzing sound intensified as the insect wiggled furiously in my grip.

“Hold it tightly!” The cat-girl stuck her tongue out of the corner of her mouth as she narrowed her eyes in concentration. “I’ve almost got it!”

Una yanked again, a little harder this time, and a wet squelch echoed through the air between us as the wing separated from the body of the batbee. The insect buzzed so loudly it became a high-pitched scream, and its stinger wiggled all about in search of something to stab.

“Do we need both of them?” I asked as I struggled to maintain a grip on the angry batbee.

“It says ‘wings’,” Una said with a nod. “Not ‘wing’, so I assume we do.”

“Fine, just be quick about it,” I said. “It’s really pissed.”

“The poor thing will die without its wings,” Una pointed out as she stuck the removed wing into her hip pouch. “I wish there was another way, but we must.”

Then the cat-girl gripped the remaining wing tightly before she yanked it free with another wet squelch.

“Got it!” Una cheered, but before we could celebrate very much, I was distracted by the thrashing of the batbee in my grasp.

The wounded batbee buzzed and struggled with quickly increasing momentum, and then it wiggled free from my hands to plop onto the ground. Then, to my surprise, the fucker started to wag its behind toward my feet. Una and I hopped away from the injured insect, and I withdrew my sword again so I could slice it up. It only took me a couple of chops to end the batbee’s rebellion and put the thing out of its misery, and I swiped a hand across my sweaty forehead.

“That was close,” I breathed.

“Alex, look out!” Una gasped as she pointed to something behind me.

“What?” I asked, but I spun around to see the entire horde of batbees swarming toward us. One batbee was smaller but faster than the others, and it led the horde as it buzzed in fury. Then the lead batbee suddenly swerved

in my beloved cat-girl's direction, and there was no way she would be able to get away from it quickly enough on her own.

Fuck.

"Una, move!" I shouted as I shoved her behind me and put myself between her and the irate insect.

The batbee hissed and buzzed as it aimed its stinger at my head, but I ducked out of the way at the last second, hauled up my sword, and sliced the killer bug in half.

The two pieces of the batbee collapsed to the ground in a spray of bodily goo, but I didn't have time to care because the rest of the swarm was closing in.

The other batbees must have heard the dying screams of the wingless insect, and now they were all seeking revenge. We had to get out of there, and fast.

Fortunately, I could manage that.

"Una, climb on my back," I ordered as I gripped my sword tightly in one hand. "I'm going to get us out of here."

"Alright," the cat-girl replied as she scrambled over my pack to cling to my shoulders.

Once my cargo was secure, I took off at blinding speed across the field of two-lips in the opposite direction of the angry horde of batbees, but then the sound of buzzing wings intensified behind me.

I glanced over my shoulder, but I could barely see the swarm around Una's hair, so I refocused on getting us far away from the field of two-lips. The batbees suddenly buzzed all around me, but I couldn't go any faster with so much weight on my back, and I dodged bug after bug as I ran.

"Watch out!" Una screamed in my ear as a batbee flew dangerously close.

I veered to the right to avoid the wiggling stinger, and then I aimed for the cover of the trees. Maybe if I put enough distance between us, the bugs would resume their pollination of the two-lips and leave us alone. I ran and ran until sweat began to drip into my eyes, and I could feel my speed beginning to wear off, but the batbees began to swarm around me like they were throwing their lives on the line.

I gripped Una beneath her hips with my left arm as I swung my sword with my right, and I smacked away the insects like a baseball player hitting a ball. One bug I struck careened out of the air with a high-pitched buzz, and then the others seemed to get the hint.

I wasn't fucking around.

The batbees began to fall back as I reached the tree line, and I started to slow down once I realized we were in the clear.

“Phew, that was a close one,” Una giggled with nervous energy as she slid from my back.

“I know,” I chuckled, and I lifted my hand to rake my fingers through my sticky, sweaty hair.

“Alex!” Una’s eyes widened to the size of saucers, and she lifted a shaking finger to point at my hand.

“What?” I glanced down at my arm, but my eyebrows shot into my hairline when I realized what had caused her such alarm.

The stinger of the batbee protruded from my arm like a splinter the size of a pencil, and as my adrenaline faded, pain radiated up my appendage. My hand was already beginning to swell up, and I cursed as I tossed the batbee to the ground.

“Shit,” I hissed as I stared at the long, pointy stick that had been released from the giant insect’s ass.

“Here,” Una said in a worried tone. “We must remove the stinger.”

The cat-girl placed a gentle hand over mine that held onto my wrist, and then she gripped the end of the stinger with her other hand. She met my

gaze with an apologetic smile, but then she ripped it out in one swift motion.

I hissed, but even though the pain was pretty bad, I didn't cry out.

"Alex," Una said in an anxious voice. "We have to get you back to Havenwood. Now."

My hand was swelling more and more with each passing moment, so I had to agree with her. We needed to do something, and fast.

"Right behind you," I said with a firm nod.

I gritted my teeth against the pain raging through my system, and then I followed the cat-girl away from the field of two-lips.

Doctor Kria would have a way to heal the sting, I was sure of it.

She had to.

Chapter Eleven

“This way, Alex,” the beautiful cat-girl urged as she cradled my injured arm in hers.

“I’m right behind you,” I assured her in a confident tone, even though my wound pulsed with pain.

What would happen if I drank more of the fast potion?

Una shot me a worried sideways glance as we rushed away from the field of two-lips, but I was more worried about the batbees coming after us than I was about my own wound. Even if the cat-girl’s clumsiness was wearing off faster than she expected, I was still concerned for her safety.

I cast a glance over my shoulder at the path behind us, but I didn’t see any of the football-sized insects anywhere.

We were in the clear.

I breathed a sigh of relief, and then I refocused on the path ahead. It was best not to use the precious elixirs unless absolutely necessary, at least until the doctor identified the rest. The trees here weren’t smiling, but I didn’t know which direction we were going in the dark. The neon moon cast a hazy green aura between the shadows of the foliage, and it reminded me of the night vision scopes on some video game guns. Una didn’t seem to

have any issues seeing in the dim light, so I trusted her to lead us in the correct direction.

“We’re taking a shortcut,” Una said as if she could read my thoughts. “The desert will be cold this late at night, and I don’t want you to catch a chill.”

“Should we light a torch?” I asked.

“I can see in the dark now.” Una shook her head. “We don’t want to attract the attention of anything roaming in the dark. There are--”

“Countless ways to die, I remember,” I chuckled.

“You saved me again, Alex,” Una said, and awed gratitude colored her voice. “I’m sorry you are hurt, but I know you were more focused on getting me to safety. How can I ever thank you?”

“It was nothing.” I waved my uninjured hand in a dismissive gesture. “As long as you’re okay, I’m happy.”

“Still,” Una pressed. “I’m very, very glad you are here in All-the-land, Alex.”

“Me, too,” I replied with a tight-lipped smile.

“I love you so much,” she continued. “Please be okay?”

“I’m sure I’ll be fine,” I said, but I was beginning to feel a little sluggish, and pain radiated up my forearm. The batbee venom was hard at

work in my system, but I put on a brave face for Una.

The ground grew more uneven, and we maneuvered up and down a couple of slopes before I realized we were closer to the mountains I'd seen during my first day in All-the-land. I gazed around with curiosity, but I couldn't see much in the darkness. The moonlight streaked down in patches like a closet light with the door cracked, but the air grew colder, and goosebumps dotted my arms. My steps were also getting a little sluggish, but I suspected it was the batbee venom instead of the opposition effect from the "fast" potion.

"You need more fur," Una observed as she stroked my shivering arm, and her fuzzy tail caressed my back as we walked. "Maybe we should stop and build a fire until the sun rises."

"We could be back in Havenwood before then if we walk all night, right?" I asked, and Una nodded in confirmation. "I'm okay, I promise."

Una glanced down at my rapidly swelling limb with a skeptical expression, but she didn't argue, and for that, I was grateful.

The courageous cat-girl had to release my hand as we climbed over a boulder, and I winced as I maneuvered across with my injured hand. I couldn't put any weight on it, and my fingers would barely curl, so I held it

uselessly against my chest. Una watched me closely, and I saw her let out a little breath of relief when I made it across.

“You’re adorable,” I chuckled as I allowed her to take my elbow. “I can tell you’re worried about me, but I’m sure it’s going to be fine. I’m the Dreamer. A little sting isn’t going to take me out.”

“Let’s just hurry,” Una urged as she increased her pace ever so slightly.

“Una...” I said as something tickled my brain. “Is something bad going to happen if we don’t get the sting treated soon?”

“Oh, well, the poison could reach your heart or your brain,” Una said in a nonchalant tone, and she shrugged her shoulders. “Or your hand could rot off and have to be cut off.”

“How long do we have?” I swallowed hard.

“I’m unsure,” Una said as her purple eyes scanned the landscape. “I’ve never been stung by a batbee before.”

“How could you not know? You’ve lived here your whole life,” I pointed out. “You were the one who knew about the batbees in the first place.”

“I am not as wise as some,” Una said. “But we must be quiet, Alex, there could be nightmares lurking nearby.”

“Do they have a territory or anything?” I asked as I lowered my voice to a whisper. “How do we know where it’s safe?”

“Havenwood is safe,” Una replied.

“But nowhere else?” I sighed.

“All-the-land is a dangerous place, Alex,” Una reminded me.
“Especially since the Dark King conquered the land.”

“Well, let’s get back to Havenwood,” I said, and I raked the fingers of my left hand through my hair.

We traversed the rugged terrain for a few more hours, and the arduous task of climbing over rocks and slopes with one hand caused us to fall into a comfortable silence. I wasn’t sure where we were or how far we were from Havenwood, but I trusted the cat-girl to get us there as quickly as possible.

I watched for nightmares everywhere, and while I still hadn’t seen any, that didn’t mean they weren’t there, lurking in the shadows. A shiver ran up my spine, and Una flashed me an encouraging smile.

“Not much further,” she promised.

“We’re doing good,” I replied with a confident smile.

“Are you certain?” Una’s purple eyes searched mine for any hint of pain, but she found none, and a smile replaced her worried frown.

“Positive.” I nodded emphatically to emphasize my words.

I began to feel woozy as I bobbed my head up and down, and I cut my overzealous nod short so I didn’t lose my balance, but Una didn’t notice me falter. Tingles had started to run up to my shoulder from the direction of my injured forearm, and the swelling was getting worse, but I could handle a little pain.

I just needed to reach Havenwood, and then I could rest.

My feet stumbled over large rocks as they slid down the slope we were on the side of, but I quickly regained my balance.

“Steady now,” Una said as she held my arm as firmly as she dared. “The waterfall is just up ahead. Watch your feet, the ground is untrustworthy.”

With the way she described it, I could almost picture a giant mouth opening out of the dirt below my feet to swallow me whole. All-the-land was a strange place, but I didn’t think it was that weird. Then again, what did I know?

The two of us approached the waterfall from a different direction than we had previously, so I didn’t spot it right away. My head throbbed, and my breathing grew more ragged with each passing moment, but I was determined to make it to Havenwood before I collapsed.

Then I heard the rushing of the water over the rock wall, and I quickened my pace. Una flashed me a sideways smile as her ears twitched with recognition at the sound, and she had to hurry to keep up with me. We were almost to the waterfall when the cat-girl's eyes flicked backward, and she froze.

"Alex, something is behind us," Una hissed. "I think it's a nightmare!"

"Shit," I cursed under my breath, but I didn't slow down. "We're almost there. I can hear the water."

"Me, too," Una confirmed.

I cast curious glances over my shoulder in an effort to see what the cat-girl had sensed, but it took me several moments to spot the black, shadowy figure gliding between the tree trunks.

Una was right, it was a nightmare. There was no other way to describe it.

Dread swept up from my gut, but I swallowed it down and refocused on getting to the waterfall as fast as I could. Una had told me the nightmares could sense fear, so I didn't want to help it out any more than I already was.

We reached the waterfall a short while later, but the nightmare still lurked around the edges of the forest. We climbed down from the rocky outcropping as the water flowed over the edge, and then we maneuvered toward the water. As we neared the roaring white wake, the water slid away from the tunnel entrance, and the two of us lunged for the opening in the stone wall with gasps of relief once the water covered the hole once more.

Were we safe from the nightmare?

Maybe they were afraid of water or something, but Una didn't seem to have the same sense of urgency she'd had a moment prior, so I assumed we were out of the nightmare's reach.

I leaned against the cool stone wall with so much gratitude I could have kissed the damp, mossy surface. The nightmare was on the other side of the waterfall, and we were safe at last. The throbbing in my forearm intensified, and my attention was brought back to my injury, but at least we were in the clear now.

"How are you feeling, Alex?" Una asked in a worried tone, and her violet orbs were like purple velvet in the dim light of the tunnel.

"I'm okay," I sighed. "Let's get upstairs. I really want to lay down."

Una nodded, took my hand, and led me down the tunnel toward the circle of light at the other end. A moment later, we were beneath the

rainbow sky again, and the flowers greeted us with friendly smiles.

The shadow of the giant sequoia tree Havenwood was built into fell across our path, and I shivered despite the heat radiating from my body. I was probably running a fever since sweat dappled my forehead despite the chill in my bones.

We rushed across the field of tall grass to the base of the tree, and then Una sang the song to open the portal. I wasn't sure if we would go upstairs to the living structures or downstairs to the healing center, but then the cat-girl pulled me up the steps toward the boughs of the canopy.

The stairs seemed never ending, and I sucked in my breath with each movement. Una eyed me every other second, and a concerned crease lined her brow, but I knew we were getting closer to my bed, so I trudged on.

Then we were at the top of the stairs, and I struggled to keep my head straight, but the next thing I knew, Una was helping me get settled into my bed. The calm eyes of Doctor Kria appeared above me a moment later, but perhaps a lot of time had passed, it was hard to tell for certain. I slid in and out of consciousness while the doctor scrutinized my stung arm, but she tutted beneath her breath in disapproval.

“How did you even get into this predicament in the first place, Alex?” Doctor Kria asked without looking up from my arm. “Batbees don't

usually attack unless provoked.”

“We ripped the wings off one,” Una announced in a pleased tone. “Alex is helping me gather all the ingredients we need for the healing potion.”

“Healing potions don’t really exist,” Doctor Kria sighed, but I wasn’t sure if I was hearing her correctly.

“No, Doctor, they’re rare, but they do exist!” Una argued. “I told you I would get one no matter what I had to do, and then Alex was sent to me. It has to be a sign!”

“There is no such thing as a magic cure,” the doctor said in a very pessimistic voice. “The most I can do is to lance the pus and apply a poultice to draw out the poison.”

“Do it,” I breathed.

I was quickly losing strength, but I was trying to hold on to be there for Una. She needed me, so I struggled to push myself up with my uninjured arm, but both women quickly pushed me back down again.

“Rest, Alex,” Una urged with eyes full of worry. “I won’t leave your side, I promise.”

“Hold still while I lance and clean the wound,” the doctor said in a low voice, and her ears wiggled in a comforting manner. “Una, restrain the

arm. This will hurt.”

“Yes, doctor.” Una nodded, but she flashed me an apologetic smile before she straddled my arm. “I’m sorry, Alex.”

“Don’t even mention it,” I said as I gave her a brave grin. “You’re just doing what you have to. Besides, I can handle a little pain.”

The two women exchanged a look, but they didn’t argue with me, and then the doctor set about draining my wound. I winced as she sliced a line across the swollen sting mark, but then it felt like a pressure valve released. I squeezed my eyes shut as I waited for the pain to end, but it was a relief to have the pus removed from the swollen wound.

When Doctor Kria squeezed the infected area with both hands on either side of the wound, I lost consciousness, but I blinked my eyes open sometime later, and my arm was wrapped in a white bandage.

“He’ll be okay now, Una,” Doctor Kria murmured to the cat-girl anxiously watching my every move. “He just needs rest.”

“I will stay with him,” the cat-girl insisted with a stubborn lift of her chin and a wide smile. “I know how to make him feel better.”

“He needs his rest, Una,” the doctor repeated. “Not you mating with him while he’s trying to recover.”

“Awwww,” Una pouted.

“Come with me,” Doctor Kria said, “you can tell me all about the adventure the two of you had.”

“I’ll be fine.” I smirked. “A little injury isn’t going to keep the Dreamer down, now is it?”

“Alright,” Una said in a reluctant tone as she hesitantly allowed Doctor Kria to pull her away from my bed.

The two of them paused at the doorway for a brief moment, but then they disappeared from my view, and I surrendered to the call of slumber. I woke up shivering a short while later, and I pulled the blankets closer around me with my unbandaged arm. Then I got too hot, so I kicked the cover off altogether, but this went back and forth for a while as I tried to get comfortable.

Una returned after a while, but the doctor was nowhere to be seen. I supposed she did have other patients to look after, and my injury wasn’t life-threatening anymore. I wasn’t sure how close to death I’d gotten, but I was glad I was in the clear now.

“How are you feeling?” The beautiful cat-girl sat gingerly on the edge of the bed, and she ran her slender fingers through my sweat-drenched hair. “Your fever must have broken.”

“I feel much better,” I said, and it was partly true. At least I was conscious now and capable of conversation. I’d take whatever improvements I could as a sign I was on the mend, so I lifted the covers and scooted back to make room for my feline companion. “Want to cuddle?”

The cat-girl grinned impossibly wide, and she slid into the spot I’d made for her without hesitation. We curled up together with her purring against my chest, and I drifted back into an easy sleep. I didn’t know how long we laid like that, but it was peaceful, and I didn’t want it to ever end.

A few hours later, I heard a knock on the entryway, and I peered across the room to see Ziti hopping across the threshold.

“Is it alright if I enter?” the furbae squeaked. “I heard you were hurt, and I wanted to come see how you were healing.”

“Come on in,” I chuckled. “The more the merrier, right, Una?”

“Here, Ziti.” The cat-girl beckoned the furbae closer. “Come snuggle with us.”

The ball of fur bounced across the room and hopped up onto the low platform bed, and the next thing I knew, she was situated in a spot between my jaw and shoulder.

I’d never have imagined I’d add a ball of fur to my list of companions, but I wasn’t complaining. Ziti had never been anything but

sweet to me, and I would do anything to keep her safe.

The furbae, the cat-girl, and I slept peacefully for a while, but then my eyes popped open, and I couldn't sleep anymore. I snuggled against Una's back, squeezed my eyelids shut, and calmed my breathing, but nothing happened.

Green moonlight streamed in through the open window, and I realized I'd slept the entire day away. It had been early morning when Una and I arrived back in Havenwood, but it had felt like no time at all had passed. I suppose healing from a massive sting could really take it out of a man, but I'd started to feel restless by that point.

I carefully extracted myself from the sleeping ladies, and I carefully crossed the room in the dark to relieve my bowels. When I was finished, I moved to the window and peered out at the landscape surrounding Havenwood. A cool breeze ruffled the tall grass and blew through my hair, but the land was still and calm. No birds sang, no squirrels chirped, and shadows crept around the edges. It had to be after midnight, if the location of the moon was any indication, but I still wasn't entirely sure if time moved the same in All-the-land or not.

I hadn't even seen a single clock since I'd been here.

After a while of window watching, I grew sleepy once more, and I crawled back into bed beside Una. Ziti resituated herself once I got comfortable, and the little furbae sighed with blissful contentment.

I wondered briefly how old the furbae was, but it seemed like everything around here had a bit of childish whimsy to it regardless of their age. My inner child had taken over during my mushroom trip, or something just as strange, but I wasn't fighting it anymore.

"Tomorrow is a new day," I murmured to myself as I wrapped my arms tightly around my cat-girlfriend.

The rest of the night passed uneventfully, and I slept until the sun struck my face the next day. The heat of the rays warmed my skin, and I quickly grew uncomfortably hot with the heat of the Una's furry tail pressed against my belly.

I shifted, and the beautiful cat-girl roused with a yawn.

"Good morning, Alex," Una murmured as she blinked sleep away from her large violet orbs. "How are you feeling?"

"That's your favorite question now," I said with a wry smirk. "I'm feeling even better than I was before. I even got out of bed last night while you were sleeping."

"You should have woken me up!" Una gasped.

“Nah,” I chuckled. “You and Ziti were both super adorable in my bed.”

“I enjoyed it very much!” Ziti giggled as she hopped up and down in front of my face. “Good morning, Dreamer!”

“Good morning,” I laughed at her enthusiasm for life, but I had to admit it was contagious.

“I have to go complete my chores,” the furbae informed us, and without any further ado, she jumped down from my bed and hopped over to the entrance.

Doctor Kria passed by the furbae as Ziti left, and the mouse-eared older woman smiled softly when she met my gaze.

“You are looking much improved, Alex the Dreamer,” the doctor said with kind eyes. “Allow me to inspect the wound and apply clean bandages.”

“Sure.” I grinned. “Do whatever you want. I’m ready to get out of this bed.”

“He already did once,” Una informed her in a conspiratorial tone, and the doctor tutted in my direction.

Then the white strips of fabric wrapped around my arm were unbound, and the doctor leaned over my forearm to inspect my wound more closely. I couldn’t get a good look at it around her light-brown hair, but I

could feel her poke it in a couple of spots. A fresh bandage was applied, and then my injured forearm was placed gently beside me once more.

“Alex, you must rest in order to heal.” Doctor Kria shook her head.
“Promise me you will stay in bed today,”

“Is it really that bad?” I asked with lifted eyebrows.

“You have another day of healing ahead of you,” the doctor confirmed with a sad smile. “Enjoy it, Dreamer, this will be the last bit of relaxation you get.”

Had Una told her about my possibly magic sperm?

I swallowed hard, but I flashed the doctor a grateful smile. “Thanks.”

The doctor dipped her head, smiled at Una, and then left again, but I was left with a boring day in bed ahead of me, so I let out a deep sigh.

“It’s not so bad,” Una said as she sat down beside me.

“No,” I said as I pulled her closer. “I’m glad you’re here, Una. I’d be bored out of my mind without you.”

“I promised I would remain by your side, no matter what,” the cat-girl reminded me with a proud lift of her chin.

I received multiple visitors throughout the day, but Una stayed good on her word, and the beautiful cat-girl stayed by my side the entire day.

Lena made her way over to my bed in a slow crawl, and I had to grit my teeth to resist the urge to pick her up and carry her over.

The sloth-lady grinned as she approached the bed, and then she pulled herself up over the edge. She sat beside Una, and the two discussed how the sting had occurred. Una's description made me sound heroic and brave, and I was glad that was the version of the tale that made it back.

"That... sounds... scary," the sloth-lady said with widened eyes and raised eyebrows. "I'm... glad... you... made... it... back!"

"Alex would never let anything happen to me," Una declared with her chest puffed out in pride.

I listened to the two ladies talking for a while, but then I started to fall back asleep, and Lena stroked my hair gently until I passed out.

The sloth-lady was gone again when I woke back up, but it had been sweet of her to visit. It seemed as though I had more friends in this magical dreamland than I'd ever had in real life.

Miss Maggie was my next visitor, and the rotund pig-lady carried a tray of food in her hands as she crossed the threshold.

"I thought you might be hungry," Miss Maggie grunted as she placed the tray across my lap.

"Thanks," I said as I scooted into a sitting position.

Placed on the tray was a cheeseburger and french fries, which had been exactly what I'd been craving. I still needed to figure out exactly how the kitchen managed to make the perfect meal every time, but that would be a quest for another day.

I chowed down on the cheeseburger, and I moaned with delight as the juicy beef hit my tongue. The cheese was perfectly melted, and the lettuce was crisp while the tomato was tangy. I couldn't have asked for a better meal, and I scarfed it down in the blink of an eye.

"Might try to breathe a little next time," Miss Maggie snorted, but I could tell she was pleased with my appetite.

"Thank you for the food," I said again as I swiped the back of my hand across my mouth. "It hit the spot perfectly."

"Well, you need to keep your strength up if you're running around with our Una," Miss Maggie said, and she shot the cat-girl a reprimanding look. "And you. You know better than to take the Dreamer on such a dangerous quest before he is ready!"

"Alex is ready!" Una insisted. "We got the first ingredient, Mags. We are one step closer to having everything we need to make a healing potion!"

Miss Maggie shook her head but didn't comment, and she took my now empty tray off my lap before she stuck it under her arm.

“Alex the Dreamer!” Mae flourished into a deep, low bow as she entered my dwelling. “You dare be injured when there is darkness to vanquish?”

“The darkness can wait a day, can’t it?” I chuckled. “I’ll get it later.”

Mae peered down her beak at me and blinked for a moment, but then she nodded. “Indeed. Vanquishing is such a tiring task.”

“I’m glad you understand.” I inclined my head. “Care to join us for a spell?”

“Indubitably,” Mae chortled as she chugged on her pipe. “What spell are you casting?”

“Not casting any spells,” I chuckled. “Just resting for a little while.”

My bed was very crowded a short while later when Lena and Ziti both returned, but I didn’t mind. I was highly enjoying being surrounded by all my new friends while I healed from the batbee sting, and I almost wished the moment would last forever.

Una stayed not only by my side, but literally attached to my side, all day long, and the frisky feline kept whispering sexual offers of blow jobs and sex in my ears. It was highly tempting, but unfortunately, my room was crowded with visitors, so the cat-girl could only purr into my ear, lick my neck, and quickly suck on my fingers when no one was looking. I had a

feeling she was going to jump on me the moment we were alone, and I had to admit, I was hoping that was the case.

Lena told me stories about the best leaves she ever ate, and Ziti entertained me with a bouncy, jumping dance. Mae sang a song encouraging me to heal swiftly so I could destroy all darkness, and the sound of chatter filled the air.

Doctor Kria eventually returned, and she chased everyone except for Una away from my room. Then she rebandaged my wound and scrutinized me for signs of illness. I was feeling much more like myself, and I was anxious to hear her give me the all clear, but I wasn't going to argue with the medical professional.

The mouse-eared older woman had managed to identify a few more of the potions thanks to the painstaking notes she had taken already, but the vast majority of them remained unknown.

My fever came back, but then broke again sometime in the night, and the bedding was drenched with sweat. I stripped off my clothes and laid back down beside the sexy cat-girl. I had to be feeling better because I was keenly aware of the way she fit up against me in ways I hadn't been while ill. She still hadn't left my side for a moment, so I knew she needed her sleep as well, but fuck if I wasn't tempted to take her up on her earlier offers.

The next day, I awoke with energy to spare, and I tickled Una awake. The beautiful cat-girl cackled with delight as she rolled away from my roaming fingers, but then the two of us left the bed for the first time in over a day. My legs were a little weak, but I was beyond ready for some different scenery, so I decided we needed to take the short trek to the dining hall.

“The Dreamer survived!”

Our arrival signaled cheers and chants of my name, and I waved at the people of Havenwood as I sat at my usual table.

“We’re saved!”

“Alex, Alex, Alex!”

Mae situated herself on my left side, while Una guarded my injured right arm. The Dodo-woman eyed me curiously as she pulled on her pipe, but then her face was shrouded with smoke.

“Dreamer Alex,” Mae said in a thoughtful voice. “May I join you on your quest to defeat the Dark King? I have long desired to end his reign of terror personally.”

“I would love it if you joined me.” I flashed the bird-lady a grateful smile. “I’ve only used a sword a couple of times now, so I’ve been hoping you would be willing to show me some pointers. That way I don’t die in some imaginative way?”

“Batbee sting is a very creative death,” Mae complimented with an incline of her head. “Although, I am glad it was a failure.”

“You and me both,” I snorted. “I want to die an old man with lots of hot babes on my arms.”

I was only partially joking.

“Ah, then you desire to be King of All-the-land,” Mae informed me. “This is an arduous task. You will need all the help you can get. I agree.”

“You’ll help me train?” I raised my eyebrows in surprise.

“The sooner the darkness is defeated, the better,” Mae declared with a firm nod.

“What about the potion ingredients?” Una reminded us. “And our imprisoned friends?”

“One thing at a time,” I said as I raked a hand through my hair. “I need to get stronger first. Mae, will you help me?”

“I am at your service and disposal, Dreamer,” Mae said with another incline of her head. “The Dark King will be running scared in no time.”

“Alex, glad to see you up and about.” Doctor Kria approached the table and caught my eye, but she didn’t take a seat. “Will you stay in Havenwood for one more day while I monitor your recovery? I wouldn’t want you to be out in the wilderness if it worsens.”

“Sure, I’ll hang out for a bit.” I exchanged a look with Una, and the cat-girl nodded. “We need to get the other ingredients for the healing potion before we do anything else, but I need some training first, so this is actually perfect.”

I wasn’t about to let anything like a minor setback get to me when I was the prophesied Dreamer. Instead, I would use the situation to my advantage.

A few hours later, Mae and I were at the base of the tree fake fighting with swords, and the bird-lady was barking out instructions to me as we circled each other in the grass. I learned more about the mysterious woman who’d come to our aide in the Mushroom Valley, but the more I found out, the more curious I became.

“So, you don’t drink any potions?” I asked.

“I’ve never touched the poisons in my life,” Mae confirmed. “I refuse to cause any weakness in my body that could prove disadvantageous to defeating his utmost evilness, the Dark King.”

After we parried blades back and forth for a while, Mae pulled out a few other weapons for me to practice with. She had axes, a mace, daggers, and a halberd, and I was surprised at my own knowledge. I supposed video games were relevant after all.

“Do you have any family?” I asked the beautiful adventurer.

“None survived,” the Dodo-woman murmured before she changed the subject, and I knew there was a painful memory there.

I decided to drop it for now, and I would work on getting to know the beautiful woman better before I pressed her to open up more. My skills improved bit by bit as the day progressed, but Mae’s talents still far surpassed my own. We called it a day once the sun began to angle toward the western horizon, and Mae and I returned to the dining hall with joyful, exhausted smiles plastered on our faces.

“Care to ingest some Giggle Juice?” Mae inquired with an arched eyebrow.

“You took the words right out of my mouth,” I replied as I clapped my hands. “Race you up the stairs?”

“I would have said the very same thing,” Mae chuckled.

We were almost to the dining hall when bells began to suddenly ring throughout the air, and they were so loud I had to cover my ears and shout at Mae in order for her to even hear me.

“What’s going on?” I yelled.

Una dashed down the rope bridge and careened into me, but her violet eyes were full of fear when they met mine.

“Oh, Alex, there you are!” Una gasped as she collapsed into my arms. “They found us! The Clover Cards!”

I turned to look toward the edge of the horizon, and then I realized the floating dots of light I could see were actually torches, and there were tons of them. The torchlight dots illuminated the edge of the grassy field, but then a weight dropped in my gut.

We were outnumbered, and we had nowhere else to go.

Havenwood wasn’t a safe haven anymore.

Chapter Twelve

“Clovers are attacking!”

“Run!”

“Hide!”

“They found us!”

The call of alarm continued to ring out loudly, but no one seemed to know what to do with this information, and everyone was running in all directions at once while screaming like chickens.

I’d just finished my second practice session with the sword, so I was still far from an expert, but I at least knew the basics of how to defend myself. I would do better than I had in the Mushroom Valley.

I considered going down into the roots to grab a potion or two to assist me in this fight, but I didn’t want to waste the magical liquids if it wasn’t necessary, so I dismissed the idea for the moment. Doctor Kria said she’d yet to identify most of them, and besides, they would still be an option if I found myself in hot water with the Clover Cards.

How had my enemies found my safe haven?

Had the Clover Cards followed our trail?

The ink blobs we'd killed had left an accusatory stain upon the ground, and we'd pulled the wagon back to the tree. It was possible there were marks, and I was filled with uncertainty. I wasn't sure how they'd discovered the location of Havenwood, but I knew one thing for sure.

We were no longer safe here.

As the Dreamer, it was up to me to keep the people of All-the-land safe from harm, but I couldn't do that if the enemy was going to show up on our doorstep.

Then Miss Maggie's head appeared above the crowd, and I was grateful for the pig-lady's height making it easier to spot her. I grabbed Una and Mae's hands, and I pulled them toward the chef. Even though we were only a few paces away from the entrance to the dining hall, it still took us a while to cut through the animal-people running in every direction.

"Everyone!" Miss Maggie boomed in a voice loud enough for all to hear. "Get into the dining hall! We must not let them sense any weakness!"

The horde of animal-people traversing the rope bridges and catwalks changed direction, and within my next few breaths, everyone had crowded into the dining hall and swept us along with them. It was a tight squeeze since the room wasn't usually this full, but I managed to get inside the door with my two lady companions.

“What do we do?”

“We have to stop them!”

“Someone, help us!”

“Where’s the Dreamer?”

Everyone talked all at once, and the panic in the air was palpable, but Miss Maggie grunted and waved her hands over her head in an effort to silence the plethora of voices.

“We need scouts,” the pig-lady declared. “Birds! Fly over the field and see how close they’ve gotten.”

“Yes, Miss Maggie,” multiple voices chirped, and then a slew of bird-people flew out the door and windows, which made the room slightly less claustrophobic.

Then the pig-lady scanned over the heads of the gathered citizens until she made eye contact with me.

“Alex, get over here,” Miss Maggie commanded in a brusque tone, and she narrowed her beady eyes at me as I approached. “What are you going to do to save Havenwood?”

“Yes! Have the Dreamer save us!” a voice from the crowd called out.

“Alex will save us all!” another echoed.

“Well?” Miss Maggie asked as she leveled me with a hard look.

“We’re all counting on you, Alex.”

I swallowed hard as I gazed out at all the anxious and fearful faces staring back at me. The people of Havenwood were terrified, and they had nowhere else to go with the Clover Cards on their literal doorstep. They needed me to fight for them, and that’s exactly what I planned to do.

“I will defeat the Clover Cards,” I announced in a loud voice, and I saw Una’s eyes well with emotion from across the room. “But I am only one man, so I will need a potion. Anyone willing to put their lives on the line can join me, and maybe with enough people, we can drive the Clover Cards away from our home for good.”

A bird flitted in through the open window and perched on the ledge. “They’re setting fire to the field!”

Everyone started to yell, scream, and run around, but I stayed by Miss Maggie’s side as I watched the chaos unfold.

“We must abandon Havenwood!” a feminine voice shrieked. “We must find a new home!”

“The Dreamer will save us!” another called out.

“I stay with you, Alex!” Una insisted, but it was hard to hear her voice through the clamoring crowd.

“Let us fight!” Mae shouted over the turmoil. “The Dreamer and I will face them in the field of battle!”

“We should hide!” Ziti squeaked, and the furbæ bounced up and down at my feet. “In the roots, in the roots!”

“Alright, alright,” I said as I lifted the palms of my hands. “We need to stay calm. Freaking out isn’t going to help anyone, and we need a plan.”

“What exactly is the plan, Mister Dreamer?” the pig-lady at my side asked under her breath. “We can’t exactly have them survive on hope alone.”

I turned to Miss Maggie with a thoughtful frown. “Where’s the safest place in Havenwood?”

“The roots,” the pig-lady informed me, which confirmed what I’d already suspected.

“Then that’s where the weakest among us need to go.” I nodded with an air of authority as I placed my hands on my hips. “Take your daughter and help Doctor Kria keep everyone calm. Anyone willing to fight will stay up here. I’ll be back after I put on my armor and grab a potion.”

“Yes, Dreamer,” Miss Maggie grunted with a crisp salute. “I will do as you say.”

“Good.” I grinned. I could get used to this. “Now, is there any water nearby? We need to douse the blaze before it reaches the tree.”

“The river on the eastern edge of the clearing,” the pig-lady explained as hope lit up her eyes. “It feeds into the waterfall.”

“Gather as many baskets, buckets, or whatever else will hold water,” I instructed in a hurried tone. “I’m going to get my gear.”

“Listen up!” Miss Maggie boomed as she turned to the gathered crowd. “The Dreamer has given me his instructions, so gather round, and pay attention. I’m only going to get one chance to explain. We’re already running out of time.”

“We must fight!” Mae interjected with an impassioned lift of her fist. “They draw closer by the instant! I will not stand idly by while the minions of darkness are upon us!”

The next thing I knew, the Dodo-woman flourished out the tails of her coat as she exited the dining hall with her head held high. I knew she was on her way to the clearing to fight, but I couldn’t let her go out there alone. I just needed enough time to get my gear strapped on and get juiced up, but she didn’t look like she was in the most patient mood.

I didn’t blame her, though, since we had an unknown number of Clover Cards getting closer and closer to the trunk of the tree we stood in. If

our defense was to be successful, it would have to be a group project.

While Miss Maggie explained the basics of my plan, I grabbed Una's hand and pulled her out the door.

"I need your help," I explained as we left the crowded dining hall.

"It would be my pleasure to assist you," Una replied with eager purple eyes.

I nodded before I quickly led the way to my dwelling, and I was surprised at how comfortable I felt traversing the precarious paths of Havenwood. The cat-girl hurried to match my pace, and in my next breath, we trotted over the rope bridge toward the ladders. Then we rushed toward my dwelling while also keeping an eye on the ground below.

The torch lights were still far in the distance, but they appeared to encircle the entirety of the sequoia tree Havenwood was built into. No matter which direction I looked, I could see a couple dots of firelight.

For all I knew, there was an army out there.

I needed more information.

Una and I reached my dwelling a few moments later, and the nervous cat-girl shook as she assisted me with my armor. I strapped on the full set of gear we'd stolen from the ink-bags we'd killed in the Mushroom Valley,

and I chose one of the swords they'd carried with them since it was in better condition than the weapon I'd gotten from Miss Maggie.

It only took a couple of minutes to get ready with Una helping me, and I lifted the visor of the helm to plant a sweet kiss on her forehead. Her violet eyes welled with tears, but they didn't spill over.

"It's going to be okay," I said in my most reassuring voice.

"I'll be right by your side," my favorite person in All-the-land promised with a brave lift of her chin.

"This is going to be dangerous," I said, and I took both her hands in mine. "I would feel much better if you went with Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria to the roots. You could keep them safe for me while I'm out taking care of the assholes threatening our home."

"O-Our... Home?" Una bit her quivering bottom lip, and her eyes were earnest as they met mine.

"Yes." I nodded solemnly. "In this crazy dream world I somehow woke up in... You are my home, Una. I can't tolerate the idea of anything happening to you. Please go with the others to the roots?"

"Fine," Una sighed as she squeezed my fingers affectionately.

The two of us returned to the dining hall, but we passed by lines of animal-people making their way into the roots of the giant sequoia. Miss

Maggie stood at the entrance, and she waved people onward with one hand while she scanned the skies for our scouts.

“Get to the roots!” Miss Maggie shouted. “Everyone, hurry! If you wish to fight, stay, but do not throw your life away. The Dreamer is here to save us!”

Not the most helpful of chants, and I shook my head in awe at the height of their expectations of me. The people of Havenwood looked at me like I was a powerful sorcerer who could wave a magic wand and solve all their problems.

According to Una, that magic wand was my dick, but I didn’t have time to think about that just then.

I had a treetop city to save.

I ducked into the dining hall, and inside sat a gathering of random animal-like people with determined expressions on their faces. I had a handful of birds, ten squirrels, several racoons, and a pair of bear-women as my mini army, and I hoped it would be enough.

I would just have to work smarter, and not harder.

“Thank you for volunteering to save Havenwood from the Clover Cards,” I began in a determined voice, and I placed my hands on my hips

and leveled my mini army with a hard look. “It could get ugly out there, so this is your last chance to change your minds.”

I met their eyes individually, and they each nodded back to me in turn. No one moved to leave, and I couldn’t help the proud smile that stretched across my face. Their bravery was admirable, but I wished there were more of them. I would still have to carry the brunt of the battle, but at least Mae was already out there causing havoc.

Una listened to my speech with wide, love-filled eyes, but I could tell she was dreading our separation, no matter how temporary it could end up being. The beautiful cat-girl put on a brave face, though, and my heart swelled with adoration for my courageous feline companion.

“Your primary goal will be to keep the fire away from the tree,” I explained. “Second to that, do anything you can to slow down or fuck with the Clover Cards.”

I received nods and salutes so I was satisfied these people would give their all to the fight we were about to participate in. I didn’t want anyone to lose their lives, but that would almost certainly happen if we did nothing at all.

My troops scurried into action, and everyone with wings grabbed baskets or buckets before they flew out the window. The non-flying animal-

people hurried out the door, and I headed after them with Una by my side. We rushed to the trunk of the giant tree Havenwood was built into, and we jogged down the stairs.

My metal armor creaked and clanged with every movement I made, and the echoes filled the crowded stairwell. I could hear the screams and yells from people still up in the branches, but at least the people heading down the stairs had a calm air.

The roots were chaotic as well with so many people shoved into the space, but I pushed my way through the animal-people's bodies to Doctor Kria as Una followed in my wake.

"I need a potion," I said without any preamble.

"I have a few identified for you to use." Kria's mousey ears wagged nervously, and her eyes flicked to the ceiling of the room. "I'm not sure how helpful they'll be, though."

"Show me." I followed the doctor as she led me to her corner of the medical ward.

"Would you prefer to drink 'wisdom,' 'smell good,' or 'purple?'" Doctor Kria showed me the bottles as she listed them off.

"You're right, that doesn't help at all," I sighed. "I'd have better luck just drinking one of the unlabeled ones at random."

“If that is your wish,” the timid doctor replied, but her eyes were full of worry. “It could be disastrous.”

“I just have to chance it.” I shook my head. “We’re running out of time.”

Doctor Kria turned to inspect her baskets full of unlabeled potions, and her fingers shook as she selected a container full of a blood-red mixture.

“Thanks,” I said as I pulled it from her grasp, and then I made my way back through the crowded roots to the stairwell.

I hesitated at the bottom landing, and Una pulled on my good hand.

“I don’t want to leave you,” the cat-girl murmured with fear in her eyes. “What if I never see you again?”

“We will be together again soon,” I promised, and I brought the back of her hand to my lips.

“Be safe,” Una whimpered before she turned to head down the stairs toward the roots. “I can’t live without you now.”

“We’ll be drinking Giggle Juice in the dining hall before the night is through,” I said, and I hoped my words were true.

I waved her off, and then I turned to the field with squared shoulders. It was time for these assholes to get what was coming to them.

Namely, me.

I bit down on the cork protecting the contents of the glass bottle in my fist, and then I tossed the liquid into my mouth as quickly as I could.

“Die, minions of evil!” Mae’s voice cut through the chaos, and I spotted the feathered female dashing across the open field with her sword jutting out in front of her.

I trotted after her, but I flicked my head from side to side in search of any enemies as I caught up to the Dodo-woman as I waited for the potion to take effect. Mae swung around when she heard the metallic clanging of my metal, and she lifted her sword as though she were about to strike me. I pulled my sword out just in time to block her blow, and I held up the flat of my hand to ward her off.

“Mae, it’s me, Alex,” I hissed through the visor of the metallic helm. “I stole some of their armor, remember?”

“You dress as one of the evil minions?” Mae tilted her head to the side in confusion, but she lowered her sword at the sound of my voice. “Dreamers do not usually deceive.”

“Well, I would rather be protected,” I argued. “But enough talk. Let’s go kill some ink-bag-bastards.”

“It is a lovely time for it.” Mae nodded curtly. “They shall rue this day!”

Then the Dodo-woman took off at a brisk trot toward the tree line on the edge of the clearing, and I could still see the dots of light from the Clover Cards’ torches. The lights grew brighter and larger in my vision as I chased after Mae, but then, as we drew closer, the dots shifted into torches held in the armored fists of the Clover Cards. They were holding the torches to the tall, dry grass that surrounded Havenwood, and the ensuing blaze illuminated their silver silhouettes.

What was taking this potion so long?

I still didn’t feel any differently, but I’d wasted enough time already.

Maybe the potion was a dud?

Fuck it.

“Come at me, bro,” I taunted as I flicked my wrist to swing my sword in a wide arch, and the closest Clover Card turned to face me.

I heard the screech of bird calls overhead, and an instant later, a load of water was dumped onto the fiery blaze eating away at the tall grass. Two more buckets of water were poured over the fire, and then the flames were extinguished.

“Fuckers,” the Clover Card closest to me cursed before he searched for a fresh dry spot to ignite.

“You’re the fucker, fucker,” I growled, and I swung my blade over my head before bringing it down against his dominant hand. My weapon sliced through his wrist, and black blood sprayed from the gaping wound left by his amputated fist. The Clover Card held up his spouting wrist and stared at it for a moment, but he didn’t scream or cry out in pain, and I wondered just how alive the ink-blobs really were.

I really needed to come up with some more clever jeers, but I didn’t have time to think of any in the moment since another Clover Card was trotting over to assist the one whose hand I’d just amputated.

The Clover Card was less than ten paces away from me, and my heart began to hammer against my ribcage. I gripped the hilt of my sword, and I prepared for the impending attack. My eyes remained locked on my approaching enemy, but then my vision blurred, and everything went red.

I blinked rapidly to clear my sight before the Clover Card killed me, but when I opened my eyes, the ink bag was laying on the ground with a red-hot hole burned through his armor.

What. The. Fuck.

Mae fought her way to my side a moment later, and the two of us stood back-to-back while we parried the blows of the Clover Cards' swords, but every time one of the ink bags got close to me, I saw red again. Every time it happened another Card man died, and then I finally realized it was me doing it.

The potion had worked after all.

I decided to experiment with this mysterious ability a little in an effort to identify my new powers, and I focused my sight on a Clover Card fighting against the Dodo-woman. I saw red once more, but this time I fought to keep my eyes open, and lasers burst from my eyes to burn into the animated card. His armor melted beneath the intense heat, and the sizzling sound of his breastplate dissipating around the blast filled my ears.

Holy shit. I had Superman laser eyes.

I smacked away another asshole's sword, and I swiveled just in time for Mae to do a wide swing that lobbed off my enemy's head. Then I stabbed the Clover Card lunging for her back in the gut, and the ink-bag thing keeled over. The two of us worked in unison to combat the pair of enemies before us, and once they fell, we found ourselves alone on the edge of the clearing standing in a pool of inky black blood.

"Do you see any more?" I asked as I searched for more torch lights.

“Over there!” Mae declared as she pointed roughly fifty paces away.

Sure enough, the dots of light that flickered and flitted about could only be one thing. More Clover Cards.

“Let’s go,” I said, and I trotted in the direction of more enemies without a second look at the bodies of the ink-bags I left behind me. It was easier to kill a faceless bag of ink than it would be to kill something more human looking, of that I was certain.

As we approached our new targets, I focused on the one furthest to the left, and then I moved down the line with my laser vision. I wasn’t sure how exactly I activated it and stopped it, but it definitely appeared to be tied to my thoughts. Whichever enemy I focused on faced the brunt of the attack, but the instant I wanted to stop, the lasers simply ceased. Every time I blinked, another Card died, but the Clover Cards didn’t cry out when I killed them, so the only sound was the metal of their armor liquifying and the ink of their bodies boiling.

Mae caught up to me a moment later, and she flicked some black blood from her blade as she ran by my side. We kept our swords at the ready, and my eyes were locked on the flickering lights ahead. I could hear the screech of birds, the chatter of squirrels and racoons, and several other animal noises, but I couldn’t see much in the pale-green shadows. I didn’t think the laser vision would work unless I could clearly see my target, so I

waited until the Clover Cards drew close enough for me to annihilate them with a single look. The moon was less than full tonight, and the shadow of the sequoia painted a black line across the clearing.

I followed this line to the other side where the torches were, and I motioned for Mae to be quiet as the Clover Cards approached. It was hard to move silently in the metallic pieces of gear I wore, but I did my best, and we drew steadily closer to the beams of light. I scooted around behind the Clover Cards and approached them from the other side, so they let out gasps of alarm when Mae and I jumped out of the shadows at them.

It was two more of the armor-covered ink-bags, and Mae didn't give them any time to react before she sliced into them like they were made of cheese. I slowly clapped for the beautiful bird-woman once she stood in the center of their bodies, and she flourished down into a quick bow before we trotted after another pair.

Just then, flames burst into glorious existence on the other end of the clearing, and the blaze illuminated the silhouette of a battle between a group of animal-people and Clover Cards.

They needed my help.

"Mae, over there!" I called out as I pointed toward the inferno quickly devouring the tall, dry grass. "We have to put out the fire and save

those creatures!”

I was hesitant to use my laser vision from this distance just in case I missed and ignited even more of the dry grass, but I still had my sword.

“Never fear! I shall guard your lovely rear!” Mae declared, and the two of us took off running toward the other side of the clearing.

“Get back!” I shouted as I skidded to a halt a few paces away, and my feet slid in the dirt.

“The Dreamer has come to save us!” A racoon-woman flashed a brilliant smile at me as she clapped her hands.

“Enough talk,” I ordered. “Get back to the tree!”

“Yes, Dreamer!” the squirrel said, and she pulled the racoon away with a forceful tug.

I barely had time to glance up before I had to block the blow of a Clover Card’s sword, but then Mae was by my side to claim his partner for herself. The Dodo-woman parried blow after blow while she whistled happily under her breath, and I could just barely hear the tune over the sound of metal striking against metal.

I feigned to the right, and the Clover Card I battled fell for my ruse, which left his side open for my attack, and I drove my sword home beneath

his breastplate. Black, inky blood sprayed from the wound like a confetti cannon, and I jumped away to avoid being soaked in the sludge.

I was already getting much better with the blade, but it was nice to know I had a foolproof weapon to fall back on. The laser eye potion had definitely shifted the tide of the battle, and victory was now within our grasp.

Then I spotted a couple of Clover Cards running toward the open door of Havenwood, and I whistled to Mae.

“They’re going after the door!” I shouted. “Get them before they get inside the city!”

“Onward!” Mae chortled happily as she took off at a brisk pace toward the trunk of the giant sequoia.

I searched for a new opponent, but it only took me a moment to find another torchlight flickering in the distance. I zoomed across the clearing as fast as I could, and I didn’t slow down or stop as I approached the two Clover Cards. I ran straight up to them, ducked below their swinging swords, and then I saw red as my laser vision activated.

The two Cards were so close when I unleashed the fiery blast from my eyes, they melted into puddles of inky black blood

Fuck, that was awesome.

I was getting better with the sword, but adrenaline was coursing through my veins, and my heart hammered out a staccato beat against my ribcage as I ran toward my next target. I didn't take time to congratulate myself on my increased skill as I lunged toward my next enemy, but I had to admit, I enjoyed the sound of my blade slicing through his breastplate.

Blood sprayed in my face and coated my helm, so I lifted my visor. For the moment, the scene around me was calm, but that didn't last for very long. In my next breath, I spotted Mae charging toward a Clover Card from across the clearing, and I rushed to my friend's aide.

"Thought you'd take all the fun for yourself, huh?" I teased as I fought off a second Clover Card attacking her from behind by flashing him my eyes of death. "Save some of the ink-bags for the rest of us, will you?"

"Increase your speed, Dreamer!" Mae taunted as she flourished her blade and removed her target's head.

The Dodo-woman sure was impressive with her weapon, and I watched her in my peripheral vision as I melted the Clover Card I faced. She danced with fluid grace, and every move she made was deadly. I was enthralled, and I almost missed an opportunity to jam my blade into the ink-bag's armpit as I watched her fight.

We fought side by side once more, but it didn't take us much longer to eliminate the threat of the Clover Cards completely. Then we stood panting for breaths in the smoldering clearing, and I grinned at the Dodo-woman when she finally sheathed her weapon.

"It seems the task is completed," Mae observed in a pleased tone.

"Almost," I said. "We should do a sweep of the bodies and see if there's any Clover Cards still alive. I'd like to know how they found us."

"Very good plan, Dreamer," Mae complimented with a dip of her head.

We made our way around the clearing, and we inspected each and every Clover Card, but every single one I found was dead already.

"Over here, Alex," Mae called out a moment later, and I trotted across the distance to her. Mae gestured to the Clover Card laying on the ground before us, and the ink-bag sputtered as I kneeled down beside him. "This one's still alive."

"You," I said as I pulled the helm off the ink-bag. "How did you guys find our home?"

The ink-bag gasped for air, but then I realized there was a puncture wound from Mae's sword on his breastplate, and black sludge seeped from the slice.

“You don’t have much longer to live,” I pointed out. “I’d get to talking.”

“T-T-The...” was all the Clover Card could gasp out.

“What?” I pressed. “Spit it out.”

Right on cue, the ink bag sputtered again, and a slew of black, inky blood nearly sprayed me right in the face.

“I didn’t mean like that,” I groaned as I leaned back a fraction. “How did you find Havenwood?”

“The... T-T-Talking... T-T-Tree,” the ink bag stuttered, but then his head began to shrivel as he slowly lost blood. “Help... Me...”

Anger bloomed in my stomach.

Those fucking trees wouldn’t talk to me, but they could tell the Clover Cards where we were?

“Fucking talking trees,” I muttered as I pushed myself up to my feet once more, but then I flashed Mae a tired smile. “That was sort of helpful at least.”

“He has left this world,” Mae observed. “What should we do with the remaining bodies?”

“I don’t think we should burn them,” I mused. “We could set fire to the field again in the process.”

“Fair thinking, Dreamer.” Mae nodded. “So, we leave them be.”

“That could attract unwanted attention as well,” I said with a shake of my head. “Let’s see what Miss Maggie thinks. I trust her judgement.”

“Oh, that stubborn pig won’t say anything against whatever you choose,” Mae pointed out. “Everyone will follow your command, Dreamer.”

“I wish I had more information to share with the others,” I said as I removed my helm and raked my fingers through my sweaty hair. “But all we know is a talking tree told them where we were.”

“The smiling trees are loyal to the Dark King now,” Mae informed me in a solemn tone. “They once stood as soldiers before they faced the magic of the many sorcerers. I’m sure he promised them some form of relief that is still forthcoming. Now, they are doomed to stand as guardians to the realm, forever on duty. Some say the trees standing in the Happy Fields are the same exact ones that appeared after the Great Turmoil. What a tragedy...”

“Wish I’d known that before I tried to talk to them,” I muttered, but then I took a deep breath and let my frustrations fall away. There was no point harping on it now. Besides, I hadn’t given the smiling trees any

pertinent information, so it wasn't like they knew anything other than which direction we'd gone in.

"Seeing behind us is easier than the path ahead," Mae said in a reassuring tone. "But you saved the people of Havenwood from the shadows of darkness this night. You should be proud, Alex."

"I couldn't have done it without you," I countered.

"Nor I you," Mae said with a tilt of her hat.

"Come on," I said as I flashed her a cheeky grin. "Let's go tell the others the coast is clear."

"After you, Dreamer," Mae said as she flourished her hand in a sweeping bow.

The Dodo-woman's chivalry was quickly growing on me, and I couldn't imagine fighting without her in the future. We made a good team, and I grinned as I led her back to the trunk of the giant sequoia.

I watched my mini army scurry inside the trunk ahead of us, and the door was still propped open, so I didn't have to sing the song to enter the stairwell. I went down instead of my usual up direction, and Mae followed behind me with curious eyes as we made our way down to the roots of the tree.

When we reached the bottom, Miss Maggie lunged at me with a halberd as I entered the hospital-like room, and I held up my hands to ward off the blow.

“It’s me!” I yelled as I guarded my face with my arms. “Alex!”

“The Dreamer has returned!” A cheer erupted from around the room.

“The Clover Cards are completely annihilated,” Mae announced. “It is safe to return to the treetops.”

“Oh, Alex! You’re alive!” Una suddenly materialized by my side and jumped into my arms, and she wrapped her legs around my waist as she peppered my dirty face with a thousand kisses.

“That I am,” I chuckled beneath her onslaught of affection.

“I thought I’d never see you again!” Una gasped without relenting her loving attack.

Then her lips found mine, and her tongue was urgently pressing against my lips. I opened myself to her, and she tangled her fingers in my hair as the kiss deepened.

“I’m here,” I murmured as I nuzzled my nose against her cheek. “I’ll never leave your side again.”

“Let’s go upstairs,” Una purred in my ear before she nibbled on the lobe. “I want to show you how worried I was about you.”

I liked the sound of that.

I could face off against the Clover Cards every single day if I was rewarded with Una's affection afterward, and I flashed the others an apologetic smile as I wrapped my arms around the cat-girl and carried her up the stairs. I was sure they would understand the urgency of Una's request, but I didn't care what they thought either way.

This was my dream, after all.

I had a beautiful bombshell in my arms, and heaven awaited me.

Being the Dreamer was fucking awesome.

Chapter Thirteen

My metallic armor clanged and creaked as I made my way up the stairs with the beautiful cat-girl in my arms. My head of shaggy black hair flopped into my eyes, and Una delicately slid the bangs out of my face. Then she flashed me a devilish grin as her fingers played with my black locks, and her tongue darted out to lick her lips.

“You’re my knight in shining armor just like in the stories of old,” Una breathed with practically heart-shaped eyes. “You saved me, and all the people of Havenwood.”

“Mae and some of the others helped, too,” I pointed out with a smirk. “But it was nothing, really. I wouldn’t let those assholes get anywhere near you, and I never will. They’ll have to get through me first.”

“You’re amazing,” Una sighed as she rested her head against my shoulder.

A few moments later, we emerged from the stairwell, and I crossed the distance to my dwelling without putting the cat-girl down. I didn’t want anything to stand in the way of our fun, and my steps were hurried as I entered the small structure provided to me.

I carried Una inside and placed her gently down on the low platform bed, but she immediately hopped back up again onto all fours. Her tail

curled around her lower back and flicked through the air, and I found my eyes drawn to the curve of her hips.

“You pleased me from head to toe during our first night together,” Una said. “I’ve wanted so badly to do the same. I want to explore every inch of your hairless body, Alex.”

“Wow,” I chuckled as I shook my head. “You’re unlike any other girl I’ve ever known before, Una.”

“May I... May I help you remove your armor?” Una asked in a tentative voice as her fingers crossed the distance between us. “Then I will clean the battle muck from your body.”

“Oh, yeah, I’m pretty gross right now, huh?” I raked a finger through my sticky hair. “What if we both go to the rain house first?”

“Would that pleasure you, Alex?” Una tilted her head to the side as she peered up at me with curious eyes.

It was sexy as fuck.

“Everything you do pleasures me, Una,” I assured her.

“I want to do more,” she insisted.

“Alright,” I chuckled. “Help me take the armor off, and we’ll go take a shower together. Then you can do whatever you want to my body.”

A shiver ran down my spine at the very thought of Una having her way with me, and my cock throbbed beneath the multiple restraints covering me.

Una hopped from the bed with nimble grace, and I had to admire her newfound agility. I supposed she'd been agile before the opposition effect, but since I'd met her while she was still clumsy, it all felt strange to me.

The cat-girl's nimble fingers found the straps of my shoulder pieces while I slid off the gauntlets and tossed them in a pile. Between the two of us, it didn't take very long to remove all my armor, and then I stood in the baggy pants and vest tunic I'd worn underneath. Both were drenched in sweat and reeked of smoke, so I was eager to get into something cleaner, or better yet, nothing at all.

The two of us left my dwelling hand in hand, and we quickly traversed the catwalk bridges to the rain house. Una slipped inside and grinned devilishly over her shoulder at me, and I hurried to follow her inside as my cock throbbed again.

It was dark in the rain house, but the cat-girl swiftly lit some lanterns along the walls before she slipped out of her tunic and stood before me. I gaped at the beauty of her breasts, the hues of her skin, and the generous curves of her hips below her toned abdomen, but then my eyes lingered on the fuzz between her legs as my mouth watered.

“Fuck, you’re sexy,” I breathed with an awed shake of my head.

“You’re really all mine?”

“For as long as you’ll have me,” Una purred, and she walked slowly toward me as her hips swayed from side to side. “It’s your turn to remove your clothes.”

“Alright,” I chuckled as I unlatched the belt holding my tunic in place. I slid out of the sleeves and pushed my pants off my hips, but then Una’s hands were on my stiff member.

“You’re so eager,” Una observed with a wry smirk, and she stroked up and down my length at a leisurely pace.

“You make me this way,” I hissed through clenched teeth as shivers shot up from my loins.

“Come beneath the rain,” Una urged, and she pulled on my cock to lead me across the room.

I would have followed her anywhere at that moment, but I was more than happy to join her beneath the pouring water. Una pulled the handle that released the flow, and the warmth of the liquid raining down my body felt magical.

“I can tell you are enjoying this.” The beautiful cat-girl winked one purple eye as she continued to stroke my cock. “But I imagine you will

really enjoy what comes next.”

Then Una grabbed soap from the container in the branch, and she worked up a rich, foamy lather before she began to coat my body with the suds. She massaged the soap across my shoulders, down my back and chest, and lathered my balls.

It felt fucking fantastic.

“Oh, Una,” I moaned as I stretched the sore muscles in my neck.
“Don’t stop...”

“Your sounds please me,” the cat-girl murmured as she continued her ministrations. “Now, let’s rinse off all these bubbles.”

The water poured over my body, and the soap rinsed off was stained black with Clover Card blood and soot, but I was left squeaky clean. I pulled Una beneath the flow as she giggled, and then I reciprocated the cleaning process.

I worked the lather into the fur at her wrists, cleaned between every finger, and then massaged the suds across her ample chest. Una’s nipples hardened beneath my exploring fingers, and I licked my lips as desire surged through me. I kept a firm grasp on my self-control as I moved my soapy hands lower, but the gasp that burst between her lips as my digits lathered the fuzzy hair of her mound was like music to my ears.

Once we were both clean and the lather had been rinsed from our hair, we lingered beneath the warm flow of liquid, and Una tilted her head up to allow me access to her full lips. I bent my head down to kiss her as the water ran across my shoulders, but it pooled in her breasts before splashing to the ground.

I wrapped my arms around the small of Una's back and pulled her against me as my rock-hard cock pulsed against her abdomen, and the beautiful cat-girl reached her hands around my neck as our kiss deepened.

"Oh, Alex," Una breathed as she fluttered her eyelashes over lust-filled eyes. "You make butterflies dance in my stomach."

"I feel the same way about you," I murmured and nibbled on her jaw line. "It's like a fire that can't be quenched."

"Let me show you what I feel," Una requested as she began to lower herself to her knees. She gazed up at me with her large, violet eyes full of desire and need, and I was unable to refuse her.

"I'm all clean now," I pointed out. "You can do whatever you want to me."

Una grinned as she wrapped both hands around my shaft, and she rubbed the tip of my cock against the softness of her lips. My member twitched against her mouth, and a grin stretched across her face.

“Maybe I should torment you with slowness,” Una mused with a mischievous look in her eyes. “You do it to me.”

“Fair is fair,” I grunted as I tried to control my breathing. I was already overflowing with desire for the seductive cat-girl, but every moment that passed made my urges stronger.

“Mmm, you’re so soft, but also hard,” Una observed in a curious tone as she massaged the length of my cock with experimental hands. “How can you be both things at once, Alex?”

“I... I don’t... know...” I gasped out as she worked my cock between her nimble fingers. “It just is what it is...”

“Well, I like it,” Una declared, and then she slid my tip between her thick lips before she curled her tongue around the head of my cock. The cat-girl massaged me with her mouth as she gazed up at me, and her large, purple eyes watered from the effort. Then she plopped off as a string of saliva dangled between my dick and her lips, and she flashed me a pleased smile. “Very tasty.”

“I’m really, really glad you like the taste of it,” I said sincerely. I never wanted her to stop.

“I wonder what your magic tastes like?” Una murmured against the head of my dick, and the vibrations sent a pleasant sensation through my

body.

Images of my load exploding into Una's mouth flashed through my mind, and I struggled to maintain my self-control, but then the frisky feline took as much of my length as would fit into her mouth.

"Fuuuck," I gasped as I dug my fingers into the thick hair of her head, and my cock hardened in her throat as she bobbed up and down.

"Una, where did you learn how to do this?"

"Learn?" Una plopped off my cock to tilt her head at me. "You're the only man I've ever encountered, so I never had a chance to learn the right way to do it. I simply want to taste every single inch of you. Something deep inside me urges me on. Am I doing it right?"

"Better than right," I groaned. "I'm not sure how much more I can take."

"Does it hurt you?" Una asked. "You have a pained look on your face."

"Far from it," I assured her. "It feels fucking amazing."

"Then I shall continue," the cat-girl said, and continue she did.

Una flicked her tongue in circular motions up and down my shaft as she took my length into her throat, and the grain of her tongue felt amazing

against the ridges of my cock. Then her fingers grasped my balls gently but firmly, and I marveled at her perfect sense of timing.

It was like Una was designed specifically for me.

Nothing could make the moment better.

I gazed down at Una's wide purple eyes with adoration, and then I peeked over her shoulder at the curves of her ass cheeks and her tail as it swayed from side to side. The soft purple-blue hue of her lower legs faded to cream around her shins, and she looked absolutely edible.

She was perfect in my eyes.

I'd have my turn with her soon enough, and then I'd show her exactly how it felt to be on the receiving end. Before I could envision much further, Una sucked my cock even deeper down her throat than she ever had before, and I gasped as my hands curled around her fuzzy ears.

"Damn, Una, you're fucking good at that," I growled, and I gave the kneeling cat-girl a pleased smile as I pulled her to her feet. "But now I want to be inside you."

"I want to join with you, too," Una breathed as she pressed herself against me. The cat-girl's lithe body fit perfectly against mine, and she stood on her tiptoes to place a kiss upon my lips. "I give myself to you fully."

That had to be the All-the-land version of giving consent, but I wasn't complaining. I was only just starting to get used to the idea of having a purple feline friend to spend my time with, so the reassurance boosted my confidence.

"And I to you," I murmured as I nuzzled her chin with my nose. I nibbled and kissed on her neck, jaw, and lips as we ground our hips against each other, but it was a simple matter to lift one of her legs up to my waist.

"Oh, Alex," Una gasped as I slid the head of my cock inside her tight tunnel, and she rocked her hips back and forth to work me even deeper inside her. "I want to feel you all the way."

I needed no further urging, and I stroked in and out a few times before I drove my cock home all the way to the hilt. With the recent battle still fresh in my mind, the sword fighting metaphor wasn't lost on me, and I smirked as Una's mouth fell open while her eyes grew impossibly large.

"Yessss," Una hissed as she clung to my shoulders, and her claws threatened to break the skin, but then she retracted them ever so slightly.

The thrill of flirting with the edge of pain elicited a moan from my lips, and then I gripped her left leg firmly in my right hand before I lifted her completely off the ground. I leaned back while Una latched her ankles

behind my back, and then I held onto her hips as I lifted her up and down on my shaft.

“Oh, oh, oh!” Una panted each time the head of my cock slammed into her tight little pussy, and her nails dug into my flesh.

“Fuck me, Una,” I growled as my arm muscles bulged from the effort it took to lift her up and down. “Ride me like one of those weird horse things.”

“The... what?” Una managed to tilt her head to the side despite her bouncing up and down on my dick, but I only chuckled as I fucked her even harder.

The walls of Una’s tunnel pulsed around the length of my shaft, and her legs vibrated in my grasp as an orgasm rocked her body. The sexy feline quivered in my arms, and her nails dug into the flesh of my shoulders as her mouth fell open in a silent moan.

“You’re mine,” I growled as a fierce possessiveness took hold of me. No one would take my cat-girl away from me. I’d kill anyone who tried.

Then the sensations began to build deep inside me, and I felt my self-control beginning to wane. I wasn’t going to be able to hold out for very much longer.

“I’m going to come,” I warned through clenched teeth.

“Give me your magic, Alex,” Una moaned as she clung to me. “Fill me up!”

I thrust inside the cat-girl’s tight entrance one more time before my seed erupted from me like a geyser bursting steam into the air. I gripped Una’s hips close against me as I came deep inside her tunnel, and her pussy clamped down on my cock like an oiled fist.

“Alexxxxx...”she whined as her climax took control of her body.

“Oh, fuck, Una,” I gasped out with the last clear thought I had before stars bloomed in my vision.

We held each other for a few moments, and we shared a few lazy nuzzles and kisses. Then the cat-girl shivered in my arms, so I gently pulled her off my cum-slick shaft and placed her on her feet.

“I love the way it feels inside me,” Una murmured as she fluttered her eyelashes at me, and she reached down to play with my cum as it slid down her lithe thigh. “It’s warm and tingly. It’s spreading all around my insides. I want more.”

I rinsed off beneath the somehow still warm liquid still pouring into the center of the room, and Una quickly mimicked my actions. Then, when we were both clean, I took her hand in mine and pulled her toward the door.

“Let’s get back to my room where we can really spread out,” I suggested with a shit-eating grin, but then I glanced around the rain house as a thought struck me. “We don’t have any clean clothes in here...”

“Let’s dash,” Una giggled.

Then she scurried across the room to where our clothes were piled haphazardly, and she scooped them up into her arms before she tossed a flirtatious smile over her shoulder at me.

“Try to keep up,” she taunted before she slipped out of the portal and disappeared.

“Fuck me, she’s fast,” I groaned before I darted after her.

I spotted the curl of Una’s tail on the rope bridge up ahead, and I hurried my pace to catch up. The mischievous cat-girl cackled with delight as her naked ass bounced across the catwalks, but I wasn’t about to be outdone by a frisky feline, so I pumped my legs even faster.

I didn’t see anyone in Havenwood while we ran through the treetop city, and I supposed they were all still cowering in the roots, but the battle was far from my mind at that moment.

I didn’t care if anyone did see us, anyway. I had nothing to be ashamed of. I’d just annihilated my enemies on the field of battle and then

claimed my woman. I was feeling on top of the world, both literally and figuratively.

The sensation of the wind blowing through my hair and across other areas was enjoyable, but I was grateful when we finally arrived at the squat structure I'd resided in ever since coming to All-the-land.

Una reached the door an instant before me, and she tossed her head back to let out a throaty laugh when I smacked her ass instead of reaching for the doorknob.

"Don't be a bruised loser," Una teased as she opened the door and sauntered into my dwelling.

I realized I still hadn't seen Una's living space, and curiosity bloomed in my gut. What was her home like? The cat-girl had been attached to my side ever since I'd arrived in All-the-land, so she was practically living with me already. Not that I cared. I wanted her to stay by my side where she belonged.

"What are you waiting for?" Una asked, and she drew me out of my thoughts with a hip cocked to one side.

"Nothing," I chuckled as I dipped my head below the portal, and I crossed the room to where Una stood beside the low platform bed. "Don't worry. You're not in trouble. This time."

“Oh?” Una giggled, but then she began to lower herself to her knees.

The sexy feline definitely enjoyed the oral arts, but I had other ideas.

I worked her up over the edge with my fingers multiple times, but my cock began to throb long before I was done giving her orgasm after orgasm. She was melted into a puddle when I was finally ready to slide my cock inside her once more.

After a few thrusts in missionary position, I rolled Una over onto her stomach, and I slid inside her from behind while I gripped her tail in my fist. I wasn't sure how sensitive it was, but Una growled with desire and pressed her ass back into me, so I had to assume she enjoyed it.

I fucked my sexy cat-girl while her ass bounced up and down along my shaft, and the sound of her cries echoing through the air were music to my ears.

“Alex, Alex, oh, yes, Alex,” Una chanted as I slammed my cock into her tight little pussy, and she clenched the blankets in tight fists. “Don't stop!”

Una wiggled uncontrollably beneath me as another orgasm rolled through her, and she tossed her head back as she arched her back. I exploded my load deep inside her womb in the same instant, and I shuddered as the pleasure shook every muscle in my body.

I wasn't done just yet, though, and we changed positions before we continued. I was amazed at my own stamina, but the moment I thought I was losing steam, Una would flutter her eyelashes or lick her lips, and I would be hard again. She rode me cowgirl style before we finished in sixty-nine, and Una was drenched in sweat by the time we collapsed in a tangled heap. After what seemed like hours, I finally opened my eyes, and I realized the moon had risen while we made love.

"Oh, Alex, I can see the stars through the window!" Una gasped as she tapped me excitedly on the chest. "Your magic seed has healed me even more! We have to tell the others!"

"Whoa," I said. "I'm still not sure that's what's happening to you. We can tell the doctor, but let's not make a big deal out of it until we know for sure."

"If that is what you wish," Una said with a small shrug. "I'm just happy I am saved from the opposition effects."

"You're amazing," I murmured into Una's hair. "But we should probably rejoin the others soon."

"I suppose you are correct," Una said in a reluctant tone, and she nuzzled her head against my chest. "Can we come back here and cuddle after?"

“Absolutely.” I grinned as I squeezed her in my arms. “But I still don’t have anything to wear.”

“Oh, I’ll run over to my dwelling and fetch some,” Una suggested, and she hopped out of bed with nimble grace. She was out the door before I could argue, but she returned a few moments later with her arms laden with fabric.

The two of us got dressed in clean clothes, but I had to take a moment to appreciate the outfit Una assembled for herself. The sexy hybrid wore purple-and-orange-striped stockings over her lithe legs, and a strappy bikini bottom was tied around her tail. A black leather corset with lace stretched over her cleavage, and it was attached to a choker necklace around her neck. She finished the ensemble with fishnet gloves that rose to her elbows, and then she strapped some of the leather armor over her shoulders and legs.

I shook my head in amazement at how sexy she managed to be with such little effort, and then I pulled on a pair of pale-green baggy pants. Una had also brought me a purple tunic, but the sleeves were tight around my muscular shoulders.

“They’re probably waiting anxiously for us,” Una said as we exited my dwelling and headed back down to the roots.

We were circling the stairwell when I noticed the door was open at the base of the tree, so we went out to the clearing instead of down to the roots. I saw Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria standing with their backs to us talking to Mae, but then I spotted some other citizens of Havenwood

“What’s going on?” I asked as we crossed the distance to them. “Did the Clover Cards come back?”

“No, we are still safe,” Miss Maggie said as she swiveled to face us. “For now.”

“Havenwood is our safe haven,” Doctor Kria said, and it was clear we’d just interrupted a terse argument between Una’s two mother figures. “We have nowhere else to go.”

“We have to figure something out,” Miss Maggie argued, and she turned to me for assistance. “Right, Dreamer? We must leave.”

“The fight is over,” I pointed out. “I know everyone is freaked out, but let’s go upstairs and talk about this over a drink.”

“Listen to Alex,” Una insisted. “He is here to save us. Which he does very, very well.”

“He did kill the Clover Cards,” Doctor Kria said as she tapped a finger against her chin.

“With some help,” Mae pointed out. “Not that I could have removed the threat as a solo mission, but I’m sure the Dreamer appreciates the assistance.”

“That I do,” I assured the Dodo-woman with a grateful smile.

“I’ve been telling you to trust the Dreamer, Doc,” Miss Maggie said as she crossed her arms over her chest, but then the doctor flashed her a stern look.

“I’ve trusted him for longer than you have,” the mousey-eared woman countered.

“Alex really saved me,” Una said in an even louder voice.

I knew she was referring to my supposed magic sperm, but the others didn’t understand her comment, or they were too busy arguing to hear her in the first place. Either way, it was time to intervene.

“Everyone, upstairs, now,” I said in a loud, booming voice, and the women around me jumped into action.

Even Miss Maggie hurried toward the stairs, and her curly pig tail wiggled as she dashed toward the portal in the trunk of the sequoia tree. Doctor Kria sighed, and her shoulders slumped as she headed after the pig-lady, and Mae tilted her hat in my direction before she trotted toward the entrance.

I chuckled at the sheer absurdity of my life now, and then I followed the gorgeous Dodo-woman, the plump pig-lady, and the anxious mouse-doctor up the stairs of a three-hundred-foot-tall tree with a cat-girl's hand held in mine.

We all returned to the dining hall, but it was a lot less crowded this time. Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria automatically migrated to my usual table, and Mae followed behind them. Una and I sat beside each other, but the others all looked at me expectantly.

Over the shoulders of my companions stood the other citizens of Havenwood, and the animal-people were silent as they waited for me to speak. Even Una turned to blink at me with those mesmerizing violet eyes, and I swallowed hard.

These people looked to me to lead them, and that was something I had zero experience with, but now their lives were in my hands.

I worked the muscle in my jaw as I slowly pushed myself to my feet, and then I climbed from the bench to the surface of the table so I stood above everyone's heads.

"Today, the unthinkable happened," I began in a clear, calm voice. "Our enemies were on our very doorstep, but they failed to achieve their goals. We worked together to drive them away, and it was glorious."

“More will come,” Miss Maggie interjected with a shake of her head. “We need to leave. The sooner, the better.”

“We’ve lived in Havenwood ever since the Great Turmoil,” Doctor Kria argued. “There is nowhere else to go!”

“Surely, we could find someplace safe,” I said. “Why don’t we call a vote?”

“What in All-the-land is that?” Mae asked as she blinked owlishly at me. “An Earthen matter?”

“It’s where everyone gets to say what choice they would like to make,” I explained. “And then we count, and if more people choose one thing over another, that’s the decision.”

“How will we choose?” an unfamiliar voice from the gathered animal-people asked, and I turned to see a mostly-bird-woman perched on the edge of the windowsill. “Between our home and the great unknown?”

The woman had a human face lined with age, and the colorful feathers with a gray underbelly made me think of a parrot. She was a little larger than what I would consider to be normal size for a bird, and I remembered seeing her flying buckets of water across the battlefield earlier in the night.

“Well, let’s talk out the pros and cons,” I said with a friendly smile at the new face. “Havenwood was discovered by the Clovers. They know where we are, so they’ll just keep on coming unless we stop them somehow.”

“Havenwood has enough space for all of us, though,” Doctor Kria pointed out. “And there are many who are not well enough to travel lying in bed in the roots.”

“We should let Alex heal them,” Una said.

“No, Una,” I said under my breath, and images of the shriveled shells of former soldiers I’d seen in the below ground bunker flashed through my mind. That was definitely not happening. “Wait.”

“Fine,” the cat-girl sighed. “I shall wait.”

I wasn’t ready to address my magic sperm just yet, but I knew the cat-girl wasn’t going to forget about it any time soon.

“So, we need a new location with enough space for everyone to live comfortably,” I mused as I tapped a finger against my chin. “Maybe we should scout out the area to the east of here. The more distance we put between us and the Clover fortress, the better.”

“There is so much unknown!”

“Havenwood cannot move!”

“What of the men?”

“Tell him, Doctor!”

Everyone clamored at once, and I raised my hands to motion for silence.

“We’re going to vote!” I shouted over the din of the crowd. “Let’s be civilized about it, alright?”

“The Dreamer has spoken!” Miss Maggie roared as she glared around at the loudest people in the room.

Silence fell immediately, and I flashed her a grateful smile.

“As I was saying,” I said in a much calmer tone. “We need a piece of paper to write tally marks on, and a pen or pencil, or something like that.”

“Pen?” Una asked with a confused tilt of her head.

“Pencil?” Mae repeated as she cocked her head in the opposite direction.

I blinked at the pair of gorgeous eyes staring up at me, and I forgot what we were talking about for a long moment as my gaze flicked back and forth between the two beautiful women.

“Um, things to write with,” I explained once I regained my composure.

“Yes, of course!” Mae chortled, and she reached into her vest pocket to remove a feather. “In All-the-land, we call it a quill!”

“I’ll remember that,” I chuckled. “Anyone have paper?”

Una hesitantly withdrew the carefully folded piece of paper from her hip pouch, and I instantly shook my head.

“No, not the recipe, Una,” I said as I waved a dismissive hand. “We can get something else, but that is incredibly generous of you.”

“What about a strip of bark?” Miss Maggie suggested, and I nodded.

“That could work.” I grinned. “Thanks, Mags.”

A short while later, I had a large piece of bark, a quill, and a room full of expectant animal-people staring at me. Word of the vote had swept through the residents of Havenwood, and the room was tightly packed again. Everyone wanted a chance to make their voice heard, but fortunately they managed to form themselves into multiple neat lines.

I wrote “leave” and “stay” on opposite sides of the piece of flat bark, and then I nodded for the first person in line to come forward.

It took me a while to get through every single person who lived in Havenwood and who was well enough to come upstairs to vote, but then I had a tally of everyone’s decision.

The “leave” column had more marks, so I cleared my throat to announce the final decision.

“Havenwood is relocating to a new spot,” I said as I surveyed the mixed expressions in the waiting crowd.

I’d found a safe haven in the dangerous dream world I’d somehow woken up in only to have it wrenched away, and now it was my responsibility to keep these strange animal-people out of harm’s way.

All part of being the Dreamer.

Chapter Fourteen

I was surprised by the silence my announcement was met with, but the people of Havenwood looked at me with trust in their eyes. I hoped it was well-placed, but it was too late to take back the decision now.

Havenwood was no longer safe.

“Where will we go?” a voice asked from the crowd.

“We need to send out scouts to look for a new location,” I explained. “We will find someplace just as safe as Havenwood used to be, and it will have enough room for everyone.”

“You’re going with us, right?” another fearful, trembling voice asked.

“Of course,” I answered with a broad smile. “I’ll stay in town until we find a new spot, and then we will all travel together.”

“Who will you choose as scouts?” Miss Maggie asked.

“Bird-people,” I said as my eyes drifted around the room before they landed on Mae. “Preferably of the flying variety.”

“I will look on land, sea, and in the air,” the Dodo-woman attested. “I will be the best scout anyone in All-the-land could have ever asked for.”

“I will need you here, Mae,” I said. “Your skills with a blade are invaluable to the safety of the people until we relocate. The Clover Cards

could be back at any moment, and I'll need you here to help me eliminate them."

Mae's chest puffed out in pride as she took a long pull from her pipe. "Very well, Dreamer, I shall do as you ask."

"Thank you," I replied with a dip of my head. Then I turned back to the rest of the crowd. "Once we find a new place, Doctor Kria will need everyone's help transporting her patients."

"Doctor Kria is a very patient woman," Una pointed out.

"I mean the men and women suffering from the opposition effect down in the roots," I explained. "On Earth they would be called 'patients.'"

"Because you have to have patience to deal with them?" Una asked with a confused frown.

"Probably." I shrugged. "Moving on. We'll need to keep watch on the edges of the clearing and set up a better emergency system. The alarm bells worked to alert everyone, but there was no plan of action to follow through with. It's dangerous to have everyone running around in a chaotic mess, you know."

"We will do as you say, Dreamer," Miss Maggie grunted. "I will organize volunteers."

"I will prepare the potion victims for travel," Doctor Kria suggested.

“And I will keep an eye on this little town,” Mae declared with a flourish of her hat. “No harm shall come to anyone while I stand watch.”

“Work with Mags with the volunteers, Mae,” I said. “While you’re awesome, I’d like you to share some of your knowledge and experience with the rest of us. Anyone who wants to learn how to fight should join us in our training sessions.”

“What a grand idea,” Mae replied. “We’ll turn these women into warriors before the day is through.”

“Perfect.” I grinned. “Any other questions?”

The room was silent once more as everyone glanced around at each other, but no one volunteered an opinion, so I assumed they were all satisfied with my plan of action.

“Alright, then let’s get to it,” I said as I clapped my hands together.

Una slid into the space beside me as soon as I sat down, and Miss Maggie brought over a breakfast tray a moment later. Mae and Doctor Kria joined us, and then Lena and Ziti also took a seat at my usual table. I looked around at my animal-people companions as pride swelled in my chest, and I had to admit they’d all wormed their way into my heart.

I ate a bowl of fruit loops cereal, chased it down with a glass of orange juice, and flashed Miss Maggie a grateful smile, but then a thought

crossed my mind.

“Mags,” I said as my brow furrowed with concern. “Will we be able to take the magic of the kitchen with us?”

“I’m unsure.” Miss Maggie frowned. “It has been here my whole life.”

“Does anyone know how it works?” I asked.

“It just does.” Doctor Kria shrugged. “It’s just one of those things that make Havenwood special.”

“That doesn’t sound very promising,” I pointed out. “Sounds like it’s staying right where it’s at.”

A worried hush swept through the people at the table with me, and everyone exchanged fearful glances. I knew they were scared to leave Havenwood behind, but I also knew we couldn’t stay here forever. Not until the Clovers were no longer a threat.

“What will we eat without the kitchen?” Una asked as her purple eyes flicked between Miss Maggie and me. “What other food is there?”

“Worst case scenario,” I said as I bumped my shoulder against hers. “We can always find food in the wild. Like bacon and noodles.”

“I do enjoy noodles,” Una said with a thoughtful nod. “You’re right, Alex, as long as we are together, everything will be okay.”

“That’s the spirit.” I grinned at the beautiful, loyal cat-girl. “Care to come train with Mae and I down in the clearing?”

“Of course.” Una nodded again, but her eyes were full of hope. “I’m so glad you’re here, Alex.”

“We should have plenty of weapons for all who wish to join,” Mae said as she puffed on her pipe. “Thanks to the dastardly Clover Cards.”

“Una,” Doctor Kria interjected as she wrung her hands anxiously. “Didn’t you say you wished to speak with me? Is everything alright?”

“Can I, Alex?” Una asked with an earnest expression on her face. “Can I tell everyone about your magic seed?”

“I think you just did,” I sighed as I raked my fingers through my hair. “Go on, you might as well explain now that you’ve brought it up.”

“Alex healed me when he mated with me and gave me his seed,” Una said in an excited rush, and she bounced up and down on the bench at my side. “The opposition effects began to wear off immediately afterward.”

“No need to brag about your mating with the Dreamer,” Mae huffed. “We all know he is special.”

“He’s... magic?” Miss Maggie’s eyes narrowed as she considered me for a long moment.

“How could that be?” Doctor Kria shook her head in disbelief. “I’ll have to analyze you myself, Una.”

“I speak true!” the cat-girl insisted. “Alex healed me.”

“I believe you think so,” Miss Maggie consoled her. “But we will need more proof before we go around telling everyone his seed is magic.”

“Thank you,” I breathed with another grateful smile for the pig-lady.

Miss Maggie had been skeptical of me when we’d first met, but her demeanor did a one-eighty the moment she realized I was the Dreamer. Now, I had a staunch ally who always seemed to have my back. I enjoyed the change, and I was glad to put the period of disbelief behind us all.

Besides, I didn’t want a town full of animal-people tearing off my clothes any time soon. I was more than happy to keep the sexy shenanigans between Una and I for the time being. My eyes flicked to Mae’s gorgeous face of their own accord, and I realized I’d grown accustomed to the absurd little beak in the center of her face.

I had to admit that I enjoyed looking at her, and her mannerisms had grown on me considerably. I respected her desire to avoid the potions altogether, and she wouldn’t be one to push herself on me just because of my healing sperm, so if she ever did make an advance, it would be for her own personal desires.

I found myself hoping that would happen, but then I realized Una had asked me a question.

“I’m sorry,” I said with a sheepish grin. “I got lost in thought for a moment. What were you asking?”

“Will you give the doc a sample?” Una asked. “She wants to inspect it.”

“A... Sample?” I asked as I looked between the mouse-woman and cat-girl. I had a feeling I knew what they meant, but in All-the-land, one could never be too certain of anything.

“Of your seed,” the doctor explained as her cheeks turned a rosy hue. The older woman couldn’t meet my eyes for a long moment, but then she cleared her throat and regained her composure. “For research purposes only, of course.”

“Right.” I swallowed down the lump in my throat. “Uh, sure, I guess? I don’t think it would hurt anything to rule it out.”

“Thank you, Dreamer,” Doctor Kria replied, and her eyes were alight with excitement. “This could change everything!”

Una and I finished up our food, and then we followed Mae downstairs to the clearing with weapons in hand. I heard a noise behind me,

and I glanced over my shoulder to see a line of animal-people trotting along after us.

It seemed the people of Havenwood were becoming braver by the minute.

Things settled into something of a routine over the next few days, and I felt like the king of the castle with the way all the citizens of Havenwood began to treat me. People bowed their heads to me as we passed on the catwalks, and anything I asked was answered with a “yes, Dreamer.” I was the man in charge now, and everyone was looking to me to keep them safe.

Havenwood was stripped down and packed up bit by bit over the course of several days, but the scouts still hadn’t found a new location for our animal-people town. The forces of the Dark King had taken over most of the wild forests, and Havenwood had been the last remaining rebel foothold in this corner of All-the-land.

I held onto hope, though, and I sent the scouts back out each morning.

Una received a thorough examination at the hands of Doctor Kria, and the mouse-lady declared the cat-girl’s side effects were indeed fading more rapidly than normally expected. The doctor eyed me in a new light

after that, and she reminded me multiple times of my promise to donate a sample of my “magic seed” for her research.

“Good morning, my darling,” I murmured in Una’s ear one morning several days after the vote had passed. “Time to rise and shine.”

“I will do the rising,” Una grumbled in a sleepy voice. “But I cannot guarantee any shining.”

Then I began my day.

Una and I started with a hike around the perimeter of the clearing, and I greeted every guard by name as I passed by them.

“Good morning, Sherri,” I said to the bear-woman who was watching our eastern edge.

“Fair morrow, Dreamer,” the large, fuzzy woman replied with a fang-filled grin. “Nothing to report this morning.”

“That’s always good news.” I returned her smile before I continued with my sweep of the perimeter.

After we checked in with the watch shift and hiked around the edge of the clearing, Una and I joined Mae and whoever else wanted to participate that day for some training exercises. The Dodo-woman had become more ruthless in her teaching methods after getting more students,

and we ran drills for over an hour before the feathered female finally relented.

Then I trotted up the stairs with Una to the dining hall for some breakfast. Ever since I'd learned the magical properties of the kitchen wouldn't move with us to the new location, I'd been gorging myself on as much delicious food as I could. I had strawberry crepes with a perfectly ripe banana and some pineapple juice on the side while Una happily munched on some bacon and eggs.

The cat-girl had been expanding her knowledge base of food ever since I'd arrived, and she often wanted to try a bite or two of my dish. It was amusing to watch her roll the flavors around with her tongue as she crossed her eyes in an effort to decide if she liked it or not.

After breakfast, Una and I usually snuck away to fuck for a few hours, and the hybrid hottie was quickly learning about everything I liked. We explored each other's bodies with no sense of urgency, but she somehow always managed to make me come several times. I was falling madly in love with the feisty feline, and I could tell the feeling was mutual. Una stayed by my side every minute of the day, and she even worked her tail off to improve her self-defense skills.

I would always finish the day with a strategy discussion around my usual table, and I included anyone who wished to participate. Miss Maggie

and Doctor Kria offered up suggestions every once in a while, but everyone mostly just hung on my every word like I was sharing royal decrees.

Roughly a week after I'd sent out the scouts, I was eating breakfast with Una and Mae when they all arrived in a flurry of feathers and bird squawks.

"Dreamer! Dreamer! Dreamer!" they chanted in unison as they flew in the dining hall window and landed on nearby tables. "We found something!"

"That's awesome!" I put down the fork full of pancakes I'd been shoving in my mouth. "Where?"

"To the east," a stork-woman said with a dip of her beak. "A network of caves exists in the Sunrise Mountains."

"That sounds lovely," I said as I brushed the crumbs from my hands and pushed myself to my feet. "Is it safe?"

"A treacherous journey through the mountains is the only way to reach it," a crow-woman informed me in a pleased tone. "The Clover Fortress lays far to the north, so there is little chance they would happen upon us by chance."

"It sounds perfect." My grin widened as I looked to Una. "What do you think, babe?"

“You ask for my thoughts?” Una’s eyes grew impossibly wide. “I follow you, Alex. Whatever you decide will be the right choice.”

“There’s no telling when the Clover Cards will return,” I said. “We are running out of time.”

“Then we move.” Mae took a long pull off her pipe, and in the next instant her face was shrouded with smoke. “Between the two of us, we could keep the people here safe while we travel across All-the-land to the Sunrise Mountains. I have been there before, and I believe I know which caves they speak of.”

“Well, good.” I nodded. “That makes me feel a lot more comfortable with the journey we have ahead of us.”

Una, Mae and I went in search of Doctor Kria and Miss Maggie to inform them of the update from the scouts, and we found the pair in the roots tending to the sick and injured.

The room had changed quite a bit since I’d last journeyed into the basement level of the sequoia tree, and it looked like the doctor had been hard at work preparing everything to be moved. Baskets were filled with medical supplies and stacked neatly by the door, and bundles of extra blankets were rolled up and placed in the corner. Several patients were up

and about, but the majority of them just stared at me from their beds as I walked past.

“The scouts have returned,” I said without preamble as we approached the mouse-eared doctor and the pig-tailed chef. “They found a network of caves in the Sunrise Mountains.”

“That is quite a distance from Havenwood,” Doctor Kria observed with a worried frown. “I’m not certain the sick will make it that far...”

“Well, we will just have to help them as much as we can,” I said. “We aren’t leaving anyone behind.”

“I’m sure the doctor did not mean to imply we should leave anyone in Havenwood,” Miss Maggie assured me. “We are merely worried about what the journey will take out of us, but some of us are afraid. My daughter has never been outside of the city. I’m not sure I can keep her protected.”

“Mae and I will help keep everyone safe,” I promised in my most reassuring voice. “We should stay focused and calm. The people are looking to us to give them an example of bravery. We can’t let them down.”

“The Dreamer speaks the truth,” Mae interjected with a serious expression on her half-bird face. “I will protect your people with my life. The forces of darkness shall not stand between us and our safe haven. We

will traverse the wilderness with our chins lifted high, and you will witness the grandeur of the weakest among us.”

While her words didn’t entirely make sense, I could tell they helped to bolster Miss Maggie and the doctor’s confidence, so I placed a hand on the Dodo-woman’s shoulder.

“Let Mae and I worry about our enemies,” I said. “The rest of you just stay focused on packing. We will leave the day after tomorrow.”

“Very well,” Miss Maggie grunted. “I will be ready to leave when you are.”

“That should be more than enough time to finish my preparations,” Doctor Kria mused.

“And it gives us another day to practice with the volunteers,” Una pointed out. “We’ll have our own army before too long with Alex in charge!”

I still wasn’t entirely comfortable with being in charge of an entire population of animal-people, but I wasn’t going to argue with my cat-girl companion.

The rest of the day passed by swiftly with everyone hard at work preparing the city for the big move, but I was eager to get on the road when

the next dawn greeted me the following morning. We only had one more day before we were moving the city of animal-people to its new location.

I didn't have any possessions to pack up, so I spent most of my time training with my sword, but then Una asked me to help with her dwelling, and my previous curiosity about her living situation returned.

Una's house was close enough to mine that we could have shouted at each other from the doorways, but the inside was completely different from my minimalist interior. Shiny things and empty potion bottles littered every surface, and a pile of clothes in the corner operated as a dresser.

Una was messy.

I chuckled to myself as I looked around the crowded dwelling. It was going to take some work to clean everything up and get it ready for the big move, but I was more than willing to put in the effort it would take. Una meant the world to me, and I wanted her to have all her little knick-knacks with her in the new safe haven.

We put everything into baskets, wooden crates, and bags within a few hours, and then Una and I stood in the center of her empty dwelling. Her violet eyes welled with tears as she glanced around, and I took her hand in mine to squeeze it warmly.

“It’s going to be okay,” I promised. “We’ll have a place together in the new location. Just you and me.”

“I would like that.” Una’s face brightened, and she returned the pressure on my fingers. “Thank you, Alex.”

“You’re most welcome,” I replied. “Now, come on, let’s get ready to go.”

The two of us joined Doctor Kria, Miss Maggie, Mae, and the others in the dining hall for one last magical meal before we headed out on our next adventure, and rounds of Giggle Juice were shared as the sun went down. It was bittersweet to say goodbye to the treetop city I’d called my home ever since waking up in the weird dream world, but I was looking forward to a sense of security again.

I couldn’t very well focus on helping Una with her potion ingredients if the Clover Cards could attack the city at any moment.

We left at sunrise the following morning, and the caravan of animal-people stretched from the waterfall to the trunk of the sequoia tree. Everyone had their backs laden with packs and baskets, but several pulled small wagons and carts. Miss Maggie took the lead with the scouts flying through the air above us while Mae and I constantly circled around the group with our swords drawn. Our other trainees helped keep an eye on the

perimeter of the crowd, and we began our trek across the landscape to the eastern horizon.

I cast one last look at the three-hundred-foot-tall tree before I took a deep breath and followed the line of people away from the clearing. The treetop city had been fun while it lasted, and I would always treasure the times I'd spent within the branches.

The caravan of animal-people trudged through the woods, but I noticed several eyes stayed locked on me and followed my every move. I was a celebrity to them, a hero, and it was a little unnerving to be constantly scrutinized. I would be happy once everyone was settled into their new homes, and I could go back to helping Una with her healing potion.

We'd traveled for half the day when the cat-girl pulled me to the side and gestured at the slightly familiar-looking trees around us.

"We're getting closer to the Happy Fields, and the two-lips," Una explained when all I could do was blink at her in confusion. "Which means we are going in the same direction as the giant footsteps again. We could still find the Sniffer Snatcher tail, Alex!"

"It would have to be half rotten by now," I pointed out. I was hesitant to leave the group, but if we could kill two birds with one stone, then I was on board. "But it's worth a shot, right?"

“I believe it is!” Una nodded emphatically. “I’ll tell Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria we are separating from the group.”

“I’ll tell Mae,” I offered. “That way she can be on extra high alert for any danger.”

Una and I met back up a few moments later, and the two of us slid our hands into a tangled knot before we trotted away from the line of animal-people.

“Let’s make this fast,” I said. “I don’t want to leave them without my protection for long.”

“Everyone will be fine,” Una said as she flashed me a sideways smile. “Even with the sick and injured among them.”

“I hope so...” was all I could say, and then I refocused on the path ahead.

Una was right, we were close to the Happy Fields and the clearing full of two-lips. It had been days since we’d been here, but our suspicions were confirmed when we saw a smiling tree in the woods.

One of the asshole, less-than-talkative trees had given away our position to the Clover Cards, and I wasn’t about to make the same mistake again.

“We have to avoid the smiling trees,” I said as I pulled Una to the side. “Remember they’re assholes loyal to the Dark King now, so try to stay out of their eyesight.”

“Got it.” Una nodded curtly, and her eyes darted around the shadowy forest. Then she spotted the smiling tree, and a glare burned in her gaze. “Assholes.”

“That’s the spirit,” I whispered, and I resisted the urge to laugh at her enthusiasm for hating the trees who had betrayed us.

The two of us hopped from tree to tree, and we were careful to stay out of sight of the smiling tree. Once we were a safe distance away, we returned to our normal pace as we searched the ground for the giant footprints. We found them a short while later, and then we held hands again as we walked in the giant’s trail.

The tracks were easy to spot, so we made good time, and we passed by the field of two-lips as the sun hit the middle of the rainbow-colored sky. The snow-capped mountains peeked over the eastern horizon, but they were growing steadily closer with each step we took.

This time, I wouldn’t be distracted by anything. We would find the Sniffer Snatcher tail, and we would claim it for ourselves, even if I had to kill a giant in order to do so, but I hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

As we drew closer to the mountains, I noticed a foul stench permeated the air, and I wrinkled my nose in disgust as I pulled Una to a halt.

“Do you smell that?” I asked, but I assumed the cat-girl’s sense of smell was far beyond my own.

“The stench of a giant,” Una answered with a solemn nod. “We’re getting closer.”

“Are they... Dangerous?” I asked as I swallowed down the lump that suddenly rose in my throat.

“Just about as much as anything in All-the-land,” Una mused.

I thought about my experiences so far. The laughing flowers and smiling trees were the remains of soldiers from the past who’d been annihilated by evil sorcerers, an animated deck of cards terrorized the region, and football-sized bees with the wings of a bat could kill you with their four-inch stinger full of venom. There certainly were plenty of ways to die in All-the-land, and hardly anything was as innocent as it first appeared.

“So, yes,” I surmised with a sideways smirk.

We continued to follow the trail of feet and the stench of giant closer to the mountains, and then we were climbing over boulders and up crevices to reach the next footprint. The two of us rose over a hill, and suddenly a

large cave was visible up ahead. A curl of smoke headed toward the sky, and the sour smell was so strong, it was almost unbearable.

The giant had to be close.

“We should be quiet,” I said in a low voice. “We don’t want to anger it if we don’t have to.”

At least I had a few potions with me just in case.

I’d made sure to grab another “big” potion from Doctor Kria’s stash of labeled elixirs before we’d separated from the group, so I wasn’t scared of a single giant. I could easily match it in strength if it came down to a fight, and I was determined to get the Sniffer Snatcher tail at all costs.

As we neared the smoke, I realized it led to a gigantic bonfire that burned in front of the opening to the cave. A massive yellow-colored boulder laid between us and the entrance, but then I realized the boulder had feet.

It was the giant.

And it was asleep.

I scanned the giant’s campground for signs of the Sniffer Snatcher, and then I noticed the black-and-white spotted fur stretched across a wooden frame on the other side of the flames from where I stood. The tail

was still attached to the skin, and it caught my eye as it flapped in the breeze like a flag.

“Una,” I breathed. “There it is!”

“I’ll keep an eye on the giant,” the cat-girl whispered as she pushed me forward. “You get the tail.”

I crept along the edge of the campsite, and I maneuvered my way over to the skinned Sniffer Snatcher with my breath held in my lungs. Every move I made seemed to echo through the air, but I tried to muffle my movements the best I could.

At least I wasn’t wearing the loud, creaky armor I’d stolen from the Clover Cards.

“Alex, wait,” Una suddenly hissed, and I froze in place as my eyes leapt to the sleeping giant. The cat-girl scurried across the distance to me, and she stood on her tip-toes to whisper in my ear. “I just realized we can get another ingredient while we are here! The drool of a giant!”

Oh, boy.

Now, I had to sneak even closer to the giant.

Una pressed an empty potion bottle into my hand, and she flashed me an encouraging smile. “You can do this, Alex. You’re the Dreamer of prophecy!”

“Alright.” I took a deep breath and let out my exhale as quietly as I could. “I can do this.”

Then I took the empty potion bottle in hand as I snuck around the giant’s sleeping form, and I let out a silent sigh of relief when I spotted the large tendril of drool dangling from the massive man’s open mouth.

I inched forward carefully with the bottle extended, and I scooped up a sliver of the slimy liquid as it reached for the ground below. I caught the drool in the bottle, but I resisted the urge to whoop with joy and instead backed away cautiously.

Una did a quiet victory dance when I raised the filled bottle above my head to show her my success, and then I turned to the wooden frame supporting the Sniffer Snatcher tail.

I corked the opening of the bottle of drool before I tucked it into the folds of my tunic, and then I pulled out my sword as silently as I could. The soft hiss of the metal releasing made sweat rise on my forehead, but the blade was free a moment later, and I got to work on sawing off the dog-monster’s tail.

I hacked through the tanned skin of the Sniffer Snatcher with blind resolve, and I didn’t hear Una’s low warning call until the sound of rocks falling caught my attention.

I swiveled with the Sniffer Snatcher tail in one hand and my sword in the other to see the giant slowly rising to his feet. The twenty-foot-tall man towered over me, and I blinked up into the impossibly large eyes as I stood frozen in place.

Well. Fuck.

“Run, Alex, run!” Una yelled, and her voice pulled me into action.

I took off running just as the giant’s hand swooped down to grab me, and I narrowly dodged the reaching tree-trunk-sized digits.

“Let’s get out of here!” I shouted as I caught up to Una, and the two of us jumped over boulders as we put as much distance between us and the giant as possible.

We ran and ran as fast as we could without looking back, but I didn’t hear the sound of the giant’s massive feet stomping through the trees, so I finally stole a glance over my shoulder. The giant stood on the side of the hill a short distance from the opening to his cave, and he watched us leave without making a move to follow us.

We were in the clear.

I slowed to a trot as I flashed Una a triumphant smile.

We now had three of the ingredients required to make the healing potion.

The Dreamer was victorious once again.

Chapter Fifteen

Una and I headed away from the giant's cave, but we crossed paths with the trail of migrants a short while later. The caravan of animal-people wasn't being very subtle, since they had to drag wagons and haul carts, and they moved at a slower pace than the two of us had on our own.

Mae jerked her chin in greeting from the rear of the caravan, and I gave her a crisp salute before I followed Una over to where Doctor Kria walked with a beaver-man. The doctor and the older man kept a slow pace, and the big-toothed semi-aquatic mammal limped with each step.

"We found two more ingredients!" Una announced with a proud grin. "Alex snuck beneath the nose of a sleeping giant!"

"You said you would be safe!" the doctor gasped. "Una! We talked about this! Even with the help of the Potion Maker, it is highly unlikely you will be able to make a healing potion."

"It is possible, though!" Una argued with an earnest look, and her ears flattened against her head. "I will heal my father!"

"Of course, you will, Una," Doctor Kria said in a softer tone, and she took the cat-girl's hand in hers to squeeze it affectionately. "I merely want you to curtail your hopes. Do not get ahead of yourself or count eggs before they are laid."

“I understand,” Una sighed, but she pulled away from the doctor. “I won’t share my joy with you.”

“You can always share it with me,” I murmured as we turned away from the doctor to walk along the caravan of animal-people. “I love it when you get excited.”

“You excite me every instant of every day,” Una said with wide, serious eyes. “Want me to show you?”

“Once we get settled in the new safe haven,” I said as I squeezed her hand. “We need to stay on the alert while everyone is on the move.”

“I will be patient if I must,” Una sighed, but then she flashed me a mischievous fang-toothed smile. “For now.”

“Come on,” I chuckled. “Let’s go see how Miss Maggie is handling the journey.”

We traveled throughout the rest of the day, but with the slow progress the caravan made, we had to make camp at night. Mae and I set up a series of watch shifts to guard our perimeter, and several fires were lit between the rows of tents.

Una and I shared a tent close to the others who I considered to be leaders among the animal-people, and I was pleased to see Mae set up her temporary dwelling near ours. The cuddly cat-girl and I curled up on the

sleeping pad and fell asleep easily, but I could hear Mae humming a tune in the next tent over. It was a comforting sound, and I sighed with contentment as the melody lulled me into slumber.

It took us multiple days to reach the Sunrise Mountains with the caravan of animal-people and their wagons, and our progress slowed even further when we faced the uneven terrain of the foothills. Wheels getting stuck became a common occurrence, and it would have been a horrible place to get ambushed, so I found myself on high alert.

By the end of the third day, we arrived at the opening to the caves the scouts had discovered. There were no signs of life anywhere nearby, but I could still smell a hint of giant in the air. The oversized man lived uncomfortably close to our current location, but he hadn't chased after us, so maybe he wasn't aggressive.

The former citizens of Havenwood gazed around at the cave openings with a mixture of curiosity and fear, but then everyone burst into action and began to unload their carts.

"Everyone wait for a moment before you start picking a cave," I said in a loud voice to halt the people beginning to unpack. "We should do a sweep first."

"Is it that dirty?" a voice from the caravan asked.

“It’s a cave,” I pointed out. “I’m sure it’s plenty dirty, but what I meant was we need to check to make sure nothing else lives here first.”

Mae, Una and I approached the mouth of the caverns, and I gazed up at the face of the mountain. With the multiple openings on the side of the slope, the network of caves almost resembled a giant skull. It was a little ominous-looking, but perhaps that would only serve to scare off our enemies.

The opening in the mountain was wide, roughly a hundred paces across, and around three times my height. The ground was dirt and rocks, but I could see flat rock outcroppings that made natural shelves a short distance inside the entrance. The ceiling of the first cavern appeared to be stable, and the walls curled slightly inward, but it looked safe enough.

“I’ll light a torch,” I said as I reached for the fire making supplies I’d begun to carry in a hip pouch similar to Una’s. “It’s going to be dark in there...”

“Caves normally are,” Mae pointed out with a wink.

“Alright, smarty pants,” I snorted with amusement as I struck a spark in the direction of the torch, and it immediately caught fire. The flames illuminated the mouth of the cavern, and I got a closer look at our possible new home.

The main cavern could have fit all of us comfortably, and I envisioned tables lining the open space. I led the way further into the cave, and my two companions followed behind me. A draft pulled on the flames of my torch, and I arched my eyebrow in curiosity as I gazed into the shadows. There was a glimmer of light in the distance, but that was impossible.

There couldn't be light further inside the cavern.

I walked forward with careful steps with Una and Mae right behind me, and I peered around at the curved walls of the cave with narrowed eyes. The first cavern shifted into a tunnel at the back of the space, and we followed the path into the shadows. The light at the end grew bigger and brighter with each step we took, but nothing could have prepared me for what I saw next.

We drew closer to the end of the tunnel, and I had to blink in the bright light of day before my vision focused and I could look around. Wind tugged at the tufts of my hair that hung around my ears, and my head turned upward. The rainbow sky greeted my eyes through the opening in the top of the mountain, and I realized it was hollow.

My eyes traveled down from the opening at the top of the peak, and my mouth gaped open when I saw the forest below me. We stood on a rock outcropping, and a ramp circled down to the trees roughly fifty feet beneath

us. I even heard the sound of running water. It was like the garden of Eden hidden away inside a hollow mountain, and a shit-eating grin spread across my face.

“This is fucking awesome!” I yelled, and the echo of my voice circled the hollow of the peak.

“Let us explore further,” Mae said, but her eyes were full of excitement as they swept around the interior of the massive cavern.

“Look, there’s a way down,” Una said as she gestured to the rock ramp I’d noticed before.

Mae and I followed the cat-girl as she went down the naturally formed ramp, but it was hard to keep my eyes focused on the path ahead with so much to look at all around me.

There were smaller caverns in the interior wall of the hollow peak, like a loafah spotted with a patchwork of caves, and I envisioned them as the homes for the flying bird-people.

The ramp led down to the slightly uneven ground where trees, shrubs, vines, and various other plants grew. I didn’t see a single face on any of the vegetation, and I breathed a sigh of relief. It seemed we were finally safe from the minions of darkness, but we had to go to the darkest place in the area to find it.

“There’s so many trees,” Una breathed as her violet orbs expanded to an impossible degree. “How do they grow inside the cave?”

“I believe this used to be filled with fire,” Mae mused as she gaped at the circular opening far over our heads. “Fire can eat even stone.”

“Oh, like a volcano,” I surmised as realization dawned on me.

We were standing in the ancient remains of a volcanic mountain, but with the trees growing inside, I didn’t think it was active anymore.

“It is beautiful,” Una said, but her eyes never stopped moving around the space. “Can we please live here, Alex? Please, oh, please!”

“I believe that’s the point of bringing the whole town with us,” I chuckled. “I’m glad you like it. Do you want to explore some more, or should we go tell the others it’s safe to come in?”

“Let’s tell everyone to come explore it with us!” Una bounced up and down on the balls of her feet, and her tail flicked excitedly behind her. “Oh, Alex, it’s so perfect! Thank you so much!”

“Well, the scouts are the ones who actually found it,” I reminded the excitable cat-girl with a self-conscious blush.

“Oh, hush,” Mae snorted. “It was your idea to send the scouts. You are our leader now, Alex the Dreamer. Are you prepared for your task?”

“The best I can be.” I shrugged. “At least we don’t have to worry about Clover Cards showing up on our doorstep at any moment. We can all breathe a little easier, and tonight, we celebrate.”

“Giggle Juice for all!” Mae clapped her hands as she clamped her pipe in the corner of her mouth.

We returned to the top of the ramp and went through the tunnel to the large entryway cavern. The rest of the former citizens of Havenwood were gathered just inside the opening, and they all hurried forward when they noticed our approach.

“It’s safe!” I announced with a broad grin stretched across my face, and I swung the torch in a wide arch above my head. “And it’s awesome!”

Everyone cheered and rushed toward the tunnel we’d just exited, and I could hear the echoes of their surprised gasps when they hit the open space of the hollow interior.

“Wow!”

“Look at this!”

“Over here!”

Everyone sounded very pleased with their new home, so I slung my arm across Una’s shoulders and flashed my feline companion a contented smile.

“Welcome home, babe.” I placed a quick kiss on her forehead, and the cat-girl leaned into my touch. “What should we call it?”

“A new name for our new safe haven?” Una asked as she tilted her head.

“Oh, there you go,” I chuckled. “We could call it New Haven.”

“I like it.” Una grinned wide, and her fangs protruded at an adorable angle. “New Haven. The perfect place to go on new adventures within the safety of your arms.”

Miss Maggie and some of the others built a large bonfire in the forest growing inside the hollow mountain, and then a mystery meat was spitted over the flames. I was curious about how well the pig-chef could actually cook without the magic of the Havenwood kitchen, but I had total faith in her ability to feed the masses. The pig-lady’s daughter stayed close to her mother’s side, and the pair stoked the fire until it blazed into life.

The meat tasted like turducken, and I wondered where Miss Maggie had gotten it from. Had the pig-lady hunted during our travels across All-the-land? Or was this meat brought from the kitchens of Havenwood?

After dinner, the residents of New Haven danced, drank, and sang the night away until the neon-green moon was visible through the circular opening high overhead. Una and I sat cross-legged on the dirt next to the

roaring flames of the bonfire, and the cat-girl spread out the recipe for the healing potion once more.

“We have the drool of a giant, the wings of a batbee, and the tail of a Sniffer Snatcher,” Una said as she ran her finger across the printed gibberish. “Now, we just need to obtain the sap of a talking tree, water that runs backwards, and the spot from a frog’s belly.”

“That sounds like nonsense,” I pointed out with an amused smirk. “But I have total faith we shall find it all.”

“When?” Una asked as she wiggled with anticipation.

“As soon as New Haven is okay without me,” I promised. “I don’t want to desert the people who are counting on me.”

“You’re the Dreamer,” Una said as if this explained everything. “You can do both.”

“I’ll do my best, Una,” I chuckled.

Then Giggle Juice was passed around, and my cup seemed bottomless for a while, and it was early in the morning when Una and I crawled into our tent. We had drunken sex, and Una was even more wild than usual. Then we passed out in a tangled knot of limbs and tail as the sun began to heat the exterior of the mountain.

Hours later, I crawled out of our temporary dwelling and stood with hands on my hips as I surveyed our new home in the light of a fresh day. The air was crisp and tasty, but it didn't induce a wave of giggles, so I assumed it was safe to breathe. The sounds of birds chirping and other movement through the trees that grew in the hollowed-out mountain echoed around the cone shape, and I inhaled deeply.

The secret little forest was the perfect place for the animal-people to build their new homes, and there was more than enough room for everyone to have some privacy. It would take some work to get some of the systems we were accustomed to in place, like showers and a kitchen, but I had faith in the ingenuity of New Haven's residents.

"Good morrow, Dreamer!" Mae greeted with a friendly smile as she approached me. "I was just headed to the stream to freshen up."

"That sounds lovely," I said. "Let me wake up Una, and we'll go with you."

"Do not dally," Mae warned. "I want to be fresh and clean for today's training session."

"Una and I are going to be leaving on another adventure soon," I said in a cautious voice. "Any chance you'd want to go with us?"

“I do love a good quest,” Mae said instantly with an emphatic nod.
“Count me in.”

“I’ll add the tally,” I countered with a wink, but in reality, relief swept through me since I didn’t want to separate myself from the Dodo-woman unless necessary. Not until I got to know her a little better, anyway.

“I’ll look for you at the water’s edge,” Mae said with a wave before she trotted off in the direction of the stream.

“I’ll be there!” I hollered at her back, but then I dipped my head inside the tent to find Una’s wide, purple eyes sleepily blinking back at me.

“Did you have any dreams, my Dreamer?” Una asked in a sleepy voice as she rubbed her eyes with the back of her furry hands. “I hope you dreamed of me.”

“You’re the best dream I’ve ever had,” I replied. “Mae went to splash off in the stream and invited us to join her. Care to rinse off with me and the Dodo-woman?”

“Sounds lovely,” Una yawned, and her tail stiffened behind her like it was doing its own morning stretches. “I cannot wait to have a bed to sleep in again. The sleeping pad is nice, and I’m glad we have something between us and the ground, but...”

“It’s not the most comfortable place to sleep,” I finished for her. “I get it. As soon as we get all the ingredients for the healing potion, then we will focus on building an awesome house for you and I to live in together.”

The two of us crawled back out of the tent, and I took Una’s hand in mine as we walked in the direction of the sound of running water. I still hadn’t fully explored the stream that ran through the hollowed-out mountain we now resided in, but the others had attested to its crisp, cold nature. Mae stood waist deep in the stream with her back to us when we approached, and the Dodo-woman splashed happily in the water.

“Come in and feel the waves,” Mae said without turning around. “They’re glorious.”

I was mesmerized by the pale curve of Mae’s bare back, and she’d released her long white hair to shimmer above the water. Her shoulders were slender, but the muscle definition was easy to see, even from a distance.

I wanted her to turn around more than anything, but I supposed I’d just have to wait to see the rest of her when I got into the water, so I began to strip off my clothes.

Una was a step ahead of me, but she left her orange-and-purple-striped stockings on, and they curled around her ass cheeks like roving

hands. The pale, creamy hue of her lower back stood in contrast to the vibrant purple-blue of her tail, and she flashed me a mischievous grin over her shoulder.

“Come and get me,” Una taunted in a husky voice.

“Oh, it is on!” I chuckled.

I flung off the remainder of my clothes and hurried over to the cat-girl before I scooped her petite form into my arms. Then I carried her into the water with me, and she giggled as her hands wrapped around the nape of my neck. I waded in until I was waist deep a few feet downstream from Mae, and then I lifted Una higher into the air.

“Do cats like water?” I asked with an arched eyebrow before I unceremoniously dropped her into the stream, and the cat-girl screeched as she splashed into the water.

“Alex!” Una reprimanded with an amused twinkle in her eyes after she came to her feet. She swished her hand into the water, and a small wave splashed toward me. “Of course, cats like water. It is necessary for life, after all.”

“On Earth, most cats don’t like to get wet,” I said as I splashed her back.

“You have feline friends on your Earth?” Mae asked as she crossed the distance to us. Her hair was pulled across her breasts, and the tendrils covered her completely to the waist, but I could see the curves of her hips and the toned muscles along her ribs.

Mae looked like a mermaid vixen, half in, half out of the waves, and I swallowed hard.

“Not friends, necessarily,” I said, but then images of smiling cats leading me away from home flashed through my mind.

That was weird.

“Are you friends with any other Dodos?” Mae questioned, and there was an eager look in her ice-blue eyes.

“You’re the first one I’ve met,” I assured her with a grin.

“Me as well,” Una added. “Dodos are rare ever since the Great Turmoil.”

“That is because my kind were some of the first to rush into the heat of battle,” Mae declared as she puffed out her chest proudly. “There is a long legacy of the bravery of my forebears, and I wish to do it sound justice by my own actions.”

“You’ve done a fantastic job, as far as I can tell,” I said. “You have been helping the people of Havenwood, even though they were all strangers

to you not that long ago.”

“I have done naught but my duty,” Mae argued.

“Still,” I persisted. “I am grateful for your presence. I consider you my first Dodo-friend.”

“It is an honor and a privilege, Dreamer,” Mae said with a dip of her head.

The three of us finished splashing off in the cool stream, and then we laid out in the sun to air dry. I kept my gaze politely away from Mae’s nude form before she pulled on some frilly white underclothes, but I couldn’t help noticing the way the fabric became translucent when wet or the ruffled gray-white feathers of her tail. I wanted to blatantly stare at the strange Dodo-woman, but I also wanted her to think highly of me, so I sighed as I cast my eyes to the ground.

After the three of us had dried off and gotten dressed, we returned to the campground where everyone had erected their temporary dwellings. A fire was roaring in the pit, and animal-people scurried all around in every direction. There was a calm air to their movements, though, with a dash of excitement.

Everyone was happy with our new home.

I found Miss Maggie and Doctor Kria beside the fire with the remains of their meal on the ground in front of them, and I gave the pair a friendly wave as I approached.

“What’s for breakfast?” I asked.

“Leftovers,” Miss Maggie grunted as she pointed to a pot being warmed by the coals. “From last night’s dinner.”

“Lovely,” Una said as she clapped her hands together. “That mystery meat was delicious.”

“My final craving from the kitchen,” Miss Maggie sighed, and a bittersweet smile stretched her lips. “I will miss it.”

“Hello, Dreamer!” Ziti squeaked as she hopped over to us.

“Good... morning,” Lena inched out as she crawled across the distance to us.

“Hey, cuties,” I greeted, and I quickly moved to pick up the slow sloth-woman. She wrapped her arms around my neck as she slid into her favorite position on my hip, and we exchanged a wide smile before I turned back to the others.

“The Dreamer wishes to depart on an expedition,” Mae announced once we were all seated with meals in hand. “And I have decided to go with him. I suggest bolstering the defenses before we leave.”

“Leaving so soon?” Miss Maggie frowned. “But New Haven has only just been founded. We need you here.”

“I’ll make sure everything is squared away before I go,” I assured her in a calm voice. “I’m not abandoning you, I’m merely helping Una gather the last ingredients needed for the healing potion.”

“That’s a very dangerous task,” Doctor Kria pointed out with a worried frown of her own. “Are you sure you and Una are both healed enough to participate in such a challenge?”

“Who else is going to do it?” I asked with one coolly arched eyebrow.

“What else do you need to get?” Ziti asked as she bounced onto my knee.

“Three things,” Una supplied. “Sap from the talking tree, water from the backwards stream, and a spot from a clever frog.”

“Oh, I know where that is!” Mae and Ziti both said at the same time, and everyone gaped at the two ladies.

“Which one?” Una asked as her eyes filled with hope.

“The talking tree,” Mae said.

“The backward stream,” Ziti said.

“Awesome!” I grinned. “This is going to be a lot easier than I expected. Half the battle is finding the damn things in this crazy dream world.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself, Dreamer,” Doctor Kria warned. “Each item will come with its own host of challenges, but you are correct, locating things in All-the-land is always the most arduous of them.”

“I... Know... A... Frog,” Lena said in a slow voice, but then she cleared her throat. “He is clever.”

“You just talked so fast!” I complimented. “Are your opposition effects wearing off?”

“Slight... ly,” Lena said with a sideways smile. “But... I can lead... You to the... Clever frog.”

“You could fix her with some of your magic,” Una whispered. “I bet if she drank your seed, she’d--”

“Uh...” I cleared my throat. “Let’s wait for Doctor Kria’s research.”

“If that is your wish.” Una shrugged.

“So, Lena and Mae are both going with us,” I informed Una in an excited voice before I flashed the furbae my most charming smile. “Will you come, too, Ziti?”

“Yes, yes, yes!” The furbie bounced up and down on my knee, and she caught several inches of air each time. “Thank you, thank you, thank you! I won’t let you down, Dreamer.”

“Everyone can totally just call me Alex,” I said. “I don’t need to be treated like a chosen one every second of every day.”

“Do you stop being the Dreamer sometimes?” Una asked with a confused tilt of her head, and her tail curled into the shape of a question mark.

“I don’t think so?” I shook my head. “I just meant, it gets to be a little weird to be called the Dreamer all the time. I’m used to being called by my name. Alex.”

“We know your name already,” Mae laughed. “Why make such a dramatic introduction now?”

I sighed. I was getting nowhere, so I decided to let it go. I’d just have to get used to everyone referring to me as the special chosen one until I left this strange dream world.

Would I ever leave All-the-land?

Did I even want to?

This place felt more and more like home with every passing moment, but I still wasn’t sure how long my hallucinations would last. If they were

even hallucinations. Days had passed, and I'd slept several times, so it was becoming less and less likely that I was imagining all of this.

I shook my head to dispel the racing thoughts, and then I turned to Miss Maggie and the doctor.

"I want there to be watchers in the air, water, and at the mouth of the cave at all times," I instructed. "Organize volunteers to rotate out so no one gets too sleepy on duty."

"Yes, Dreamer," Miss Maggie grunted with a dip of her head.

"We also need to start building living structures," I continued in a commanding tone. "Dwellings and gathering spaces. The beaver-people could help with that."

"I'll need a warm, dry place for my victims," Doctor Kria interjected.

"Everyone should work together to build the medical center before any of the other structures," I said. "The patients and victims should be our first priority since they can't defend themselves."

"It will be done as you ask, Dreamer," the doctor murmured in a pleased tone.

It seemed the two mother figures were happy with my instructions, and I felt confident they would be able to run things smoothly in my

absence. They'd been doing it in Havenwood long before I'd arrived, after all.

After we finished our meal and the discussions about our quest, my four lady companions packed up their temporary dwellings and prepared for our departure. Doctor Kria gave me a few potions just in case we ran into trouble, but with the additions of Mae, Lena, and Ziti, I was sure our quest was going to be a breeze. By the time we were ready to head out, a small crowd of well-wishers had gathered near the natural stone ramp, and I had to shake more than a few hands as we passed through the residents of New Haven.

"We should befriend some friesians," Ziti squeaked from her position upon my shoulder. "That way we won't have to walk all the way across All-the-land to find the ingredients we need."

"What are friesians?" I asked.

"The creatures you called horse-things," Una supplied in a cheerful tone. "Did I not tell you that?"

"Nope," I chuckled. "But yeah, that's a great idea, Ziti. Do you happen to know where we could find any?"

"I sure do! I was talking to my family about it as I packed," the furbae explained. "They encountered some not far from here when they

were exploring the mountains.”

“Why would the horse-things be in the mountains?” I wondered out loud.

“There could be a plethora of reasons,” Mae mused. “Perhaps they found a protected mountain valley since some of the best grass can grow on the sides of a slope. Maybe they are hiding from common enemies, and they may desire to form an alliance with us. We will simply have to ask them ourselves.”

“I don’t think they talk,” I pointed out.

“I can speak to them,” Ziti squeaked as she bounced up and down on my shoulder.

“Which way should we go?” I asked as excitement bloomed in my chest. I imagined me and my companions riding the strange horse-like creatures across the landscape, and it sounded awesome.

“To the north,” Ziti said, and the furbae’s shivers of excitement slowly calmed.

“Onward and upward,” Mae declared, and she stomped forward with a purposeful gait.

I shook my head in amusement as I followed behind the Dodo-woman with Una’s hand in mine. Lena remained wrapped around my torso,

and her warmth was a comforting presence on my side. Ziti nuzzled against my neck, and I could feel her talons gripping the fabric of my tunic as we trudged across the rocky landscape.

The frisky cat-girl shot me flirtatious winks every so often as we walked, but the determined Dodo-woman led the way without sparing me a single look. She was of single-minded focus, and it seemed there would be no distracting her. It was for the best, though, so I took a deep breath and refocused on the path ahead.

We walked around boulders the size of cars, climbed up crevices, and traversed the rocky terrain with careful steps. Then we scurried up the rim of a valley, and we crossed over to the other side to find a field of flowering clovers. Munching on the grass with serene flicks of their tails was a herd of the friesians, and I gaped in awe at the strange creatures.

Just like the ones we'd encountered when we'd ambushed the Clover Cards, the horse-like creatures had two prong-like horns on their heads, and four eyes blinked about in all directions. The animals were monochrome in color, but instead of black-and-white squares, these ones were striped in zigzags almost like a zebra, but they still looked almost transparent when they walked beneath the sunlight.

Ziti immediately hopped down from my shoulder and rushed across the field of clovers, so I was left with little choice but to follow behind her.

The four of us walked in the furbae's wake, but our steps were more cautious than her ambitious bounces.

"Tuk ruk nuk nuk," the furbae squeaked in a loud voice as she approached the friesians.

I didn't understand a word of the gibberish, but the horse-like creatures all neighed before they circled around the furbae like they were going to have a meeting. I hurried across the distance to them, and I slipped cautiously between the bodies of the animals before I kneeled down at Ziti's side. Mae and Una squeezed into the circle behind me, and then we all stared at each other.

The tension in the air was palpable, and I had a feeling we were on probation with the horse things. They would allow us to say our piece, but I could tell they would chase us off if they didn't like what they heard.

"Nuk ruk zuk tuk." Ziti spouted off some more gibberish, but I merely plastered a friendly smile on my face as I gazed into the multitude of eyes before me.

Then one of the strange-looking creatures stepped forward a couple of paces and tossed its head.

"Zuk zuk tuk nuk ruk!" Ziti persisted, but the creature tossed its head again.

This continued for a few more moments, but then the friesian let out a loud neigh, and Ziti giggled.

“Is that good?” I asked.

“Very good,” the furbae replied. “They have agreed to help us. They heard the Dreamer had arrived from a different herd, but they aren’t sure if it’s you yet.”

“That’s fair, I suppose,” I said as I peered at the friesians out of the corner of my eye. They seemed friendly enough, and if Ziti trusted them, then so did I. Plus, they were our best shot at getting across All-the-land swiftly.

I bowed low to the friesian who’d spoken to Ziti, and it tossed its head in reply. A strange guttural sound escaped the creature’s lips, and I shot Ziti a questioning glance.

“He says you are welcome to ride him,” the furbae translated. “He is the leader, so it would be appropriate.”

“Very well,” I said. “But we really only need three rides. One for Mae, one for Una, and one for you, Lena and me.”

“I will tell him,” Ziti said, and then she uttered some more gibberish in the direction of the friesian herd leader. They exchanged a few nonsense words, and then the furbae bounced twice like she was nodding. “He says

he will grant us three members of his herd as you requested, but since you do not need all of them, then he will stay in the valley with the remainder of the herd.”

“That sounds like a good plan.” I dipped my head politely at the head horse-thing, and then I surveyed the rest of the gathered herd. I scrutinized them closely until I determined the three strongest-looking ones, and I pointed them out individually.

A few moments later, we were all mounted bareback on the friesian creatures, and they exchanged a few words with their leader before we trotted away from the majority of the herd. The wind blew in my face, and Lena clung tightly to my chest as we trotted over the rim and down the slope. It was exhilarating how much faster we were able to travel atop the steeds’ back, and it made me never want to walk again.

We traveled the rest of the day, made camp that night, then continued the next morning. At first, I was worried the horse-like creatures would escape in the middle of the night since we didn’t tie them down to anything, but Ziti assured me they were staying with their temporary herd until the mission was completed. I trusted the furbae’s word, so I put the thought out of my mind and focused on the search for water running backward.

Ziti had visited the stream that flowed in the wrong direction already, so she gave us directions past the Mushroom Valley to the canyon on the

other side. It took us several days to reach our destination, and we remained vigilant as we drew closer to the Clover fortress.

We crossed the road where we'd ambushed the Clover Cards, and the friesians tossed their heads with discomfort. The smell of inky blood was still strong in the air, but it had a sour, aged odor to it. We were close to the spot where we'd fought off the animated card assholes, but I gave the location a wide berth so the steeds wouldn't freak out on me.

Then we approached the canyon, and it was like the world suddenly ended. The ground dropped off abruptly, and erosion threatened the edges. Plants still grew along every angle of the rock face, but we stayed far away from the ledge.

Ziti directed us in a northeastern direction from that point, and I heard the sound of water before I saw the stream, but it was enough to cause excitement to bloom in my chest. We'd been traveling for days with little pause, and we'd finally arrived at our destination.

We dismounted from the friesians' backs, and then we continued the rest of the way on foot as the sound of running water grew louder with each step we took.

Once we finally came up to the stream, I stood and blinked at the scene before me for a long moment. Then I shook my head to clear my

vision, but my eyes still saw the same thing. The water flowed up from the depths of the canyon, and fish flew overhead with long flappers on either side of their scaled bodies. The fish splashed in and out of the waves as they made their way up over the rim of the canyon, just like Una had said.

“Here we are!” Ziti squeaked. “I present the backwards stream.”

“You did great, Ziti,” I complimented with a proud smile. “Thank you.”

“Yes, thank you, little Ziti,” Una said as she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. “All we have to do is scoop some up, and we’ll have one more ingredient!”

“Where did that blasted bottle disappear to?” Mae riffled through her pack for a moment, and then she brought out an empty potion container. “Ah, here it is. Already been cleaned of the toxic poisons it previously contained.”

I accepted the empty bottle with a grateful smile, removed Lena from around my chest, and then made my way over to the stream, but the second I began to approach the backward running water, the flying fish swooped down out of the air to flap above my head.

I covered my head with my arms as I dashed through the flock of flying fish, and the wet, slimy feeling of their scales against my skin urged

me forward at an even faster pace. Then I was at the water's edge, but the fish continued to harry my every move as I dipped the bottle into the stream.

The current nearly swept the bottle from my grasp, but I maintained my grip despite the distracting fish flying in circles around my head. They began to toss their bodies out of the air at me, and the fish smacking into me almost knocked me into the waves.

“Alex, watch out!” Una called from a safe distance.

“It will be fish for dinner if they hurt you,” Mae declared.

“I don't think they can,” I shouted through the sound of flapping wings.

I finished scooping the liquid up into the no-longer-empty container, and then I fought my way back through the flying fish to my companions. The fish stopped their flight and flopped into the foamy water, and I breathed a sigh of relief.

They were like guardians of the water, but they didn't do the best job of it.

“Alright,” I breathed as I held up the filled bottle. “Another ingredient down. What should we tackle next?”

“The Talking Tree is a little ways south of here,” Mae suggested.
“Below the Mushroom Valley.”

“The frog... Is near... Havenwood,” Lena reminded me.

“Which is closer?” I asked as I looked from one to the other.

“The Talking Tree,” Una said with a decisive nod. “Then we can convince the frog to hand over a spot on the way back to the Sunrise Mountains.”

“Sounds like a plan.” I grinned. “Everyone, mount up. No time to lose.”

We rode until long after the sun had set, but the stars and neon-green moon lit the way enough for us to continue our trek for a time. When I could tell my companions’ energy began to wane, I called for a halt, and everyone sighed gratefully.

Then we made camp in the dark, but we were too exhausted to start a fire or cook a meal. We’d packed enough travel rations to get us through several days, but I was definitely missing the magic of Havenwood’s kitchen as I fell asleep that night. Maybe we could pay the sequoia a visit after speaking to the frog.

The five of us remounted our steeds early the next morning, and we traveled all day without pause along the outskirts of the Mushroom Valley. I

kept the road through the valley in my peripheral vision, but I didn't want to travel too openly along the path used by the Clover Cards.

We didn't encounter any other people or enemies as we traversed the fungi forest, but an anxious tension began to permeate my companions as the light began to fade. The growing darkness caused shadows to lengthen, and Ziti was shivering in the cold, so I bundled her up in the folds of my tunic.

The sun was casting its final rays across the rainbow sky when we left the Mushroom Valley and entered a dark forest. A path ran between the tree trunks, and this was the direction Mae led us in. We dipped below the branches and entered a world of shadows, and I could feel the fear radiating from Lena and Ziti.

"It's okay, ladies," I murmured in a comforting voice since I didn't want to attract any nightmares. "You're with the Dreamer, remember? Nothing bad is going to happen to you. We'll get this sap and be on our way."

"Promise?" Ziti squeaked, and I ruffled her fur with a gentle finger.

"Absolutely." I grinned down at the furbie and the sloth-lady. "It's going to be a piece of cake."

“It has been a while since I have visited my old friend,” Mae said in a thoughtful tone as she rode ahead of me. Her hips swayed with every movement of her steed’s flanks, and her hat was perched at a precarious angle, but she didn’t seem to notice. “I hope my absence has not angered him overly.”

“You know a talking tree?” Una gasped.

“The tree could be mad at you?” I followed up as I felt a knot form in my stomach.

Maybe this wouldn’t be the piece of cake I’d imagined it to be.

“He will be upset that I haven’t spoken to him in quite some time,” Mae explained. “But he is a tree. He cannot harm us very much.”

“Very much?” I pressed, but then another thought struck me. “Wait, aren’t the trees all loyal to the Dark King now? What makes you think we can trust this one?”

“Have no fear, Alex the Dreamer,” Mae said in a reassuring tone as she waved her hand. “I have thoroughly vetted all of my friends for shadows of darkness. He will be pleased to meet such an esteemed character. It’s been a long time since we have had a hero in these parts, and while I’ve done my best to fill that role, there is nothing quite like authentic heroism.”

“I find you to be very heroic,” I told her.

“You have done so much for us,” Una added with an emphatic nod.

“You’re pretty heroic, too, Una,” I informed the cat-girl, and I flashed her a proud grin. “I’m glad you’re all with me on this quest. It wouldn’t be the same without every single one of you.”

“I am... Happy to be... with you, Dreamer,” Lena said in a slightly less slow voice than usual.

“Ditto!” Ziti added as she snuggled deeper into my tunic.

“Onward, Mae,” I declared. “To the Talking Tree.”

Mae tipped her hat, and she led us forward with squared shoulders.

We traveled through the shadows of the forest for a while, and my steed seemed more than capable of finding his way in the dark, so I sat back and let it continue to follow Mae’s mount. Una flashed me wide, white-toothed smiles every few paces, and her purple eyes scanned the forest around us with curiosity.

A short while later, Mae pulled to a halt on the edge of a clearing, and the Dodo-woman dismounted her steed. Una and I followed suit, and then we huddled together.

“The tree stands in that clearing,” Mae informed me. “But he is probably sleeping right now. He will be annoyed with us if we rouse him

too early, so we should make camp nearby and wait til morning to greet him.”

“Sounds good to me.” I nodded.

We made camp quickly and quietly so as not to disturb the Talking Tree’s slumber, and then we slept soundly until the sun lit up the forest floor the next morning. Ziti, Lena, Una, and Mae hurried around the campsite preparing food and putting away our tents, and I stood helplessly watching them with nothing to do.

I finally decided to practice with my sword for a bit while they finished their tasks, but as soon as I’d gone through a couple of drills, my companions hollered that they were ready to meet the Talking Tree.

We walked as a group toward the clearing where the tree stood, but I allowed Mae to take the lead again. The Dodo-woman paused for a moment at the edge of the clearing, but then she lifted her chin and marched decisively forward. We followed in her wake, but I peered curiously around her shoulder at the tree growing in the middle of the field of grass.

It looked like an ancient oak tree, and just like the smiling trees in the Happy Fields, a face was carved into the wooden bark of its trunk. This face wasn’t smiling, though, and a stern frown graced the tree’s countenance, so I wasn’t confident he was open to having visitors just then.

Mae marched forward despite the grumpy expression on the tree's face, and the Dodo-woman waved in greeting as she approached.

"Wizened ancestor tree," Mae greeted. "I have brought visitors from across the realm to witness your great knowledge."

"Mae! Where have you been!" A stern male voice echoed from the trunk of the tree. "Present your peoples! Take your time, I'm not going anywhere. It's alright, you can laugh, that was a joke."

I chuckled nervously and ran my fingers through my hair, and Mae turned to flourish her arms toward me in a regal gesture.

"This, wise one, is the Dreamer of prophecy." Mae's eyes were bright with pride as she introduced me. "You may refer to him as Alex."

Then Mae introduced the rest of my companions to the ancient tree, and we all bowed one by one before we sat cross-legged in the grass in front of the trunk face.

"I appreciate you bringing visitors to see me, Mae," the tree said. "But I wished you would have come sooner. I have been very lonely here alone in the field. You promised you would come earlier, but I suppose that is the word of a bird. So flighty and unreliable..."

The tree continued to ramble for a while, and we all exchanged glances. How were we supposed to get some sap from this talking tree if we

couldn't get it to shut up long enough to ask for it? I took a deep, calming breath, and I listened to the tree's words as the sun traveled across the sky. Una grew bored after a while, and she began to pluck at the stems of grass by her legs and braid them in intricate patterns. Lena and Ziti started to fall asleep in my arms, and I struggled to stay focused myself.

Mae had no such trouble, and the Dodo-woman nodded as she listened attentively. She murmured words of encouragement and acknowledgement under her breath, and she didn't seem bothered at all by the tree's selfish ranting.

I supposed it had been a while since the tree received visitors.

The sun was beginning to set once again, and my stomach grumbled loudly in complaint, but the tree talked on. After a while longer, I could take no more of the ceaseless chatter, and I cleared my throat to get the ancient plant's attention.

"If you don't mind the interruption," I said with my most charming smile. "We are actually here for a reason. We need some of your sap. Is there anything we can give in exchange for it?"

"Dear Alex the Dreamer," the tree chuckled. "You have given me hours of attention. That is all I could ever ask for. My sap comes from my mouth, and I've been working up a bunch. Here, come help yourself."

Then the tree opened its mouth wide, and I saw the sticky sap stretch between the wooden lips. Inside its mouth-like opening resembled the hollow interior of a log, and I wondered just how long this tree had stood in this spot.

Lena pulled an empty potion bottle from my pack and handed it to me, and I flashed my companions a triumphant smile as I scooped up some of the sticky liquid.

Another ingredient down. One more left.

“Thank you so much, Sir Tree,” I said with a low bow. “I apologize for leaving so soon, but we really must get going before it gets too late.”

“Thank you for spending the day with me,” the tree replied, and his wooden lips stretched into a grin. “Please return more frequently.”

“We will!” we all promised as we waved goodbye to the talking tree.

The five of us returned to our mounts, and we managed to travel a good distance in the dark before we came to a halt. We had one ingredient left to acquire, and it was on the way back to more familiar territory.

My companions and I arrived at the pool below the familiar waterfall the following evening, and the sounds of insects chirping in the bushes was comforting. We dismounted and allowed the friesians to wander around in search of a snack while we approached the water.

Lena climbed down from my torso to lead the way to a bush along the edge of the pool furthest away from the waterfall. The churned-up foam lingered around the rim of the pond, and lily pads grew where the water was calmer.

“Hello, friend,” Lena said as she stuck her head inside the bush.
“Come meet the Dreamer!”

“Can it be?” a masculine voice croaked, but then the large frog hopped out of the bush to stand before us. “Has the Dreamer’s coming taken place already?”

The frog was yellow with red spots, and its eyes had narrow, horizontal slits for pupils. The giant amphibian was roughly the size of a German Shepherd, and in any other circumstances, it would have freaked me the fuck out. As it was, I swallowed down my discomfort and approached the talking frog with a friendly smile.

“Hello, Sir Frog,” I said with a bow of my head. “It is a pleasure to meet you. I am here on urgent business. We are looking for one of your spots.”

“One of my spots?” The frog narrowed his eyes. “Nothing comes for free, Dreamer.”

“What is the price I must pay?” I asked.

The large yellow-red frog was silent for a long moment as he considered me through narrowed eyes. His tongue darted around me, caught an insect, and then whipped back inside the creature's mouth, but finally, he nodded.

"Answer my riddle correctly," the frog said in a serious tone, and he hopped a step closer to stare up at me. "Let's see if the Dreamer has brains."

"I assure you, I do," I said with an amused smirk. "Lay the riddle on me. I can figure it out."

The frog cleared his throat. "The tale as old as our spinning globe, these four sentinels long stand opposed. Locked in a battle of endless days, when one shall leave, another stays. Spinning the wheel and always on the run, trapped in the cycle until time is done. One a beacon of endless light, another the harbinger of the long dark night. Balanced perfectly betwixt each other, if you don't like the weather, just wait for another. What am I?"

I stood and blinked at the talking frog for a long moment as his words repeated in my head several times.

"Night, light..." I murmured as I considered what the answer could be. I didn't know much about All-the-land, so it could be a trick getting it right, but something was itching in my brain. "Cycle, balance, and the weather..."

Realization dawned on me, and I snapped my fingers.

“Ah-ha! I got it!” I grinned. “The seasons.”

“This is the correct response,” the frog replied with widened eyes.

“You truly are a powerful thinker. I shall gift you with one of my spots, but you have to pick the correct one.”

Oh, boy. Another guessing game.

Still, I felt confident in my ability to figure out which spot he’d be willing to part with, so I cast a quick glance over his person before I pointed to the spot on his stomach.

“That one,” I declared with a triumphant grin.

“Very good, Dreamer,” the frog said with a bob of his head, and then he reared back to peel the spot off his flesh. He didn’t seem to be harmed by this process, and I wondered if he would grow a new one or not.

I tucked the spot into my hip pouch, and I shook the frog’s slimy hand.

“Thank you very much,” I said as I dipped my head into another respectful bow. “Because of you, All-the-land will be saved from the opposition effects of the potions.”

I turned to my companions and did a little victory dance.

“You did it, Alex!” Una cheered as she jumped up and down, and her tail swished excitedly through the air.

“We have all the ingredients needed?” Mae asked.

“Yep!” I chuckled. “Now, all we need is the Potion Maker.”

We’d completed our quest to acquire all the necessary ingredients in the healing potion, but the next part would be even harder. I was more determined than ever before to do everything in my power to save the people of All-the-land, and I flashed my companions a shit-eating grin.

“Time to get back to New Haven,” I announced.

Mae saluted, Una nodded, Ziti bounced, and Lena slowly grinned wider and wider.

I knew without a shadow of a doubt my loyal companions and I could handle anything together.

Chapter Sixteen

My companions and I remounted our steeds with smiles all around, and even the horse-like creatures we rode seemed to feel more exuberant than they had before. The challenge of gathering the ingredients was behind us, and soon we would be able to heal the victims of the potions' opposition effect. It was a bright day in All-the-land, and we were all eager to return to our new home to share the news.

"Where is the Potion Maker you reference?" Mae asked as we rode to the east.

"Imprisoned in the Clover fortress," Una explained with a solemn expression.

"I know the location," Mae supplied in a cheerful tone. "Shall we go fetch her?"

"Soon," I said, and I held up my hands to caution patience. "We need to make sure the people of New Haven did okay while we were gone. Once New Haven is taken care of, we can plan our next quest."

"I very much enjoyed this quest," the Dodo-woman said. "I would like to travel with you more in the future."

“I feel the same way.” I grinned. “The more, the merrier, I always say.”

“Alex!” Una suddenly hissed in a low voice, and she gestured to something behind me. “Look over there!”

My head swiveled in the direction she’d pointed to, and my breath froze in my chest when I saw the nightmare lurking in the shadows of the forest. The dark hooded figure was hovering through the trees, but it didn’t seem like it had noticed us yet.

“Let’s move,” I whispered, and I clucked my tongue to my steed as quietly as I could.

Our mounts were tense as we trotted away from the nightmare, and I kept shooting glances over my shoulder to make sure we weren’t being followed.

So far, so good.

I finally let out my breath in a deep exhale when the nightmare slipped out of view, but I was more aware of my surroundings after that. It took us the rest of the day to reach the foothills of the Sunrise Mountains, and my companions were beyond exhausted when I finally called for a halt.

Una slid from her mount’s back and landed in a puddle on the ground, and she wrinkled her nose at me. “Smells like giant drool.”

I narrowed my eyes and scrutinized the puddle she'd jumped into, and then my gaze swept across the ground to a crater in the dirt nearby. It certainly resembled the giant tracks we'd followed into the mountains, so her theory held water.

"I'm sorry," I said with a sympathetic smile. "Should we keep going until we find some water for you to clean off in?"

"That isn't necessary." Una shook her head. "We will be home soon, and then I can bathe in the stream."

"It will be nice once we set up hot showers," I said, and I flashed the cat-girl a sideways smirk. "It'll really feel like home then."

We made camp in the foothills of the Sunrise Mountains, but we finished our journey to the caves of New Haven early the next morning. The others rushed out to the mouth-like opening to greet us, so I knew we'd been spotted by the sentries.

Miss Maggie and her daughter were among the group of animal-people jostling to say hello to the returning adventurers, but I made sure to thank the friesian I'd ridden for his efforts before I crossed the distance to the pig-lady and her offspring.

"Good morning." I grinned. "Any news?"

“All was calm in your absence,” Miss Maggie reported in a pleasant tone. “Although your presence was still missed around the bonfire. How was your quest?”

“Alex helped us get every single ingredient we need!” Una blurted out, and she rushed forward to squeeze the pig-lady into a warm embrace before she did the same to the younger pig-girl while she rambled on. “We talked to a really, really old tree for hours, and then he finally spit into one of our empty bottles.”

We all chuckled in amusement at the excitable cat-girl, and I gestured to the opening of the cave as I moved toward the interior while Una continued to talk.

“Oh,” Una gasped. “And we also went to where the fish fly above the backwards stream! I’d heard stories about it, but I’d never been there before, and now I get to tell my father I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Where’s Doctor Kria?”

“What else happened on your travels?” Miss Maggie pressed when Una paused to breathe.

“That about covers it,” I said. “Besides the talking frog we took a spot from.”

“The Dreamer and his companions have been very busy, it seems,” Doctor Kria observed with a wry smile as she walked up the ramp to meet us. “I take it you were successful?”

“Very much so,” Una said with an energetic nod. “We have all the ingredients for the ‘heal others’ potion now.”

“All we need is Livia,” Doctor Kria said, and then she sighed as she tucked her hair behind her mousey ears. “I do hope she is okay...”

“They wouldn’t hurt someone so powerful, would they?” I asked as a worried knot settled into my stomach.

What if all of this effort was for nothing?

“I don’t think so.” Miss Maggie shook her head. “Livia was the last Potion Maker in All-the-land, so they’ll want to keep her alive. We aren’t the only ones who want to get our hands on more potions, you know. The Dark King has been funneling every potion in the land toward his black palace for a long time now, making them more and more rare by the day.”

“We are fortunate you managed to acquire so many,” Doctor Kria said with a dip of her head. “There hasn’t been that many potions around in a very long time. I just wish it was a simpler process to identify them.”

“Glad to be of service,” I said, but then I gestured to Mae. “But I wasn’t alone, so I can’t take all the credit.”

“It was an honor to assist the Dreamer,” Mae assured me as she tipped her hat respectfully. “Even if I didn’t know you were the Dreamer at the time.”

We all walked down the ramp into the heart of the mountain peak, and I paused to warm my hands on the roaring flames of the bonfire. The others gathered around me with expectant expressions, and I furrowed my brow as I thought about what needed to be done next.

We had to rescue the Potion Maker from imprisonment, but that was going to be a challenge in and of itself. Livia was held captive in the Clover fortress, and I had no idea how difficult it would be to penetrate the defenses. Una had escaped the cells with the assistance of an agility potion, so maybe she knew a way to get back inside undetected.

At the same time, we were all still living a nomadic lifestyle in the cave, so living structures were a high priority as well. I wanted to make sure the animal-people I now considered my responsibility were well taken care of before I embarked on a life-or-death mission. There was no telling if I’d return from the Clover fortress, but I wanted to make sure everyone was okay either way.

I cleared my throat, but everyone was still staring attentively at me, so I flashed them all my most charming smile.

“Why don’t we make New Haven livable before we plan the prison break for Livia?” I suggested in a cautious tone. “We want to have someplace for her to live when we get back, after all, and I’m not sure if a tent is much of an upgrade from a prison cell.”

“None of us have homes right now,” Miss Maggie agreed as she planted her hands on her hips and surveyed the cavernous hollow mountain. “We should focus on our own needs before we expend energy saving others.”

“Every day Livia remains a prisoner is another day closer to her death,” Doctor Kria pointed out. “We cannot wait forever. She will eventually be taken to the Dark King.”

“How do we even know if she’s still there?” I asked. “We need more information.”

“She was alive and well when I escaped,” Una reminded us. “There would be a large procession of Cards if they were to take her to the Black Palace. Word would sweep all across All-the-land.”

“We should send the bird-people to scout it out first,” I suggested. “Once we get a confirmation that she is still there, and some more information about the defenses on the fortress, then we can plan our attack.”

“Let’s take the fight to the Queen of Clover’s doorstep,” Mae suggested as she shook her fist in the air. “No time to spare!”

“I like your enthusiasm,” I chuckled. “I will definitely include you in all stages of the plan, Mae, and anyone else who would like to help as well.”

“I will spread the word,” Miss Maggie grunted. “And send out scouts to the fortress.”

“Thank you,” I said. “I’m going to work on building Una and me a place to live while we wait for the scouts to return. Do we have any tools, like axes, hammers, nails, that sort of thing?”

“I believe they are in with the weapons stash,” Doctor Kria mused as she tapped a finger against her chin. “I will locate the items you require, but a lot of the work has already been done. I know Isabel and Halli felled a lot of timber for everyone to use.”

“Awesome.” I grinned. “You ladies are definitely some of the hardest working people I’ve ever known. It is an honor to assist you in building a dope ass home.”

The women all chuckled at my lingo, and then we separated to go about our various tasks. After I got the tools I needed to build a house, I began to gather the materials. Doctor Kria was correct, the beaver-women

had already chopped down some smaller trees, cut them into sections, and laid them out in rows.

Una and I lashed them together with rope, and then with the help of a couple bear-women who'd walked by at the perfect time, we all lifted the entire thing up into the limbs of a tree. With teamwork, muscle power, and determination, we placed the floor of our treehouse down in a mostly flat position, but then it was time to take a break.

Una and I checked in on the others to see if they needed any help, and I found everyone to be hard at work with their own dwellings. Mae was building something resembling a nest high in the boughs of a pine tree, but I wasn't sure how she'd gotten up there without wings. Lena and Ziti had decided to become roommates, and the two shared a tiny alcove in a hollow evergreen.

Miss Maggie was creating a semi-subterranean dwelling, so she was digging into the soft, moist dirt first while her daughter scurried around hauling baskets of earth to a pile and back again.

Doctor Kria had merged together several tents into a larger canopy, but she was bustling between beds and couldn't stop to chat. We waved at her before we moved on to see what the other residents of New Haven were up to, but the need for a medical center rose in my priorities.

I'd have to gather some volunteers to complete it quickly, but there was no shortage of help lately. Everyone wanted to say they'd assisted the Dreamer in some way, and the many hands made every task easier.

Then Una and I visited the beaver-women where they were creating a dam in the stream, and I verified that they wouldn't allow the pool to overtake too much of the space around us. The last thing we needed was for our new town to be flooded, but the beaver-women were confident they were in complete control of the water.

Plus, damming the stream would create a pool big enough to swim in, and that would benefit everybody.

I checked in with the watch shift, and I stopped to chat with Shelli the bear-woman. She was quickly becoming a familiar face between the training sessions and the task of guarding our town, but I was more than happy to have the volunteers. She seemed mostly humanoid with large, round ears jutting from curly brown hair, but her hands were shaped like bear claws. She was muscular in the shoulders, her back curved slightly, and a stubby tail stuck out from a hole in her tunic.

"How goes it?" I asked after I'd given her a friendly wave.

"All's well," Shelli reported, and joy brightened her eyes. "It is a pleasure to see you, Dreamer."

“You, too,” I chuckled.

I made small talk for a little while longer, but then I politely bade goodbye to the large bear-woman, and we continued our trek around our new home.

After we took a tour of the cavern, we returned to the beginnings of our treehouse home, and Una and I worked the rest of the day together. It was late afternoon when a family of squirrel-people came over to help us with the roof. Then the bear-women joined us in the task, followed by the beaver-people. Mae finished with her nest and added her hands to the heavy lifting, and a short while later, our house was completed.

I dusted off my hands and placed them on my hips as I surveyed the treehouse we’d all just created together, and I had to admit it looked like a cozy home for Una and me. The cat-girl wasted no time in bringing her possessions inside, and soon the space was filled with her trinkets and belongings.

“I’m sorry you don’t have many items, Alex,” Una said with a soft smile. “I feel like I’ve taken over our home with all my things.”

“Nonsense,” I reassured her, and I tossed my arm around her shoulders as we gazed up at the little cabin nestled in the branches. “It’s our

home, and I'll gather stuff throughout our adventures. Besides, I have you. What else would I need?"

This earned me a wide, shit-eating grin from the beautiful cat-girl, and then we locked our fingers together as we turned to the others.

"How about we get some grub?" I suggested. "Then we can celebrate our accomplishments with some Giggle Juice."

"The town is coming along quite nicely," Mae observed as we crossed the distance to the bonfire. "It is almost time for our next adventure."

"You are quite right." I tilted my head to the Dodo-woman. "We'll check in with the scouts after dinner."

"I can't wait until my father and Livia see New Haven," Una gushed as she skipped along beside me. "Havenwood was built so long ago, I'm surprised anyone knew how to make houses anymore. How are we going to make the rain house, Alex?"

"I don't know." I frowned. "I'm not sure how it was built in the first place, so I have no idea how to go about replicating it here. Maybe we should return to Havenwood to do some research on the rain house and the kitchen."

“Someday, when the Dreamer has triumphed against the Dark King, All-the-land will be safe from the darkness, and we can return to Havenwood,” Mae said. “Until that day comes, we must keep our eyes peeled like boiled eggs.”

We joined the rest of the residents of New Haven around the bonfire, and a light dinner of salad and vegetables was shared by all. After everyone had their fill, Una, Mae and I were relaxing on the soft grass beneath the trees, and I gazed around with contentment at the progress made in a single day.

“New Haven is safe,” Doctor Kria said as she approached the three of us with a soft smile. “You have much to be proud of, Dreamer.”

“My job is far from done,” I countered with a smirk. “I still need to save the captives of the Clover Queen.”

“That is a task for tomorrow,” the mouse-eared doctor replied as she situated herself on the grass nearby. “But the scouts have returned from the Clover fortress.”

“Oh?” I raised my eyebrows. I’d assumed they would come find me as soon as the bird-people had returned to New Haven, but I supposed I’d been pretty busy for the majority of the day.

“They are ready to report their findings,” Doctor Kria said. “I told them to get some rest, and then we would discuss the details in the morning.”

“The sooner we leave, the better,” I said as I raked my fingers through my hair. “How many are willing to aid in our fight?”

“I have counted twenty volunteers,” Mae informed me. “They have all been present at multiple training sessions, so I have confidence in their ability to at least defend themselves.”

“All good news.” I worked the muscle in my jaw. “We will leave for the Clover fortress tomorrow as soon as we get everything ready.”

“Oh, Alex!” Una clapped her hands together with excitement. “We can finally get the ‘heal other’ potion made and save All-the-land! Thank you, thank you, thank you!”

“Hold your thanks until I defeat the Dark King,” I said. “Saving your friends from prison is the least I could do.”

Una and I slept in our new bed for the first time that night, and I got the best sleep of my life with the cuddly cat-girl snuggled into my arms. I awoke shortly before dawn feeling well-rested, if the pale hues through the open cone were any indication, and I stretched my arms over my head as I

yawned. The sleeping cat-girl by my side wiggled closer against me, and I chuckled as I nudged her awake.

“Good morning, beautiful,” I murmured in a sing-song voice. “Today is the day we launch a prison break.”

Una’s eyes popped open, and she grinned up at me. “I’m awake!”

The two of us ate a quick breakfast as the volunteers began to gather around the bonfire, but I waited to address the crowd until Mae arrived with the bird-people scouts. Then I pushed myself up from the ground and dusted off my pants.

“What can you tell me about the Clover fortress?” I asked the scouts.

“The castle is heavily guarded by both nightmares and Cards,” a stork-woman informed me in a solemn voice. “There is only one visible way to enter or exit.”

“That’s not true,” Una interjected with a shake of her head. “I escaped through the back way.”

“There’s a back way?” I arched an eyebrow. “That sounds promising.”

“I went through the sewer system when I escaped,” the cat-girl explained. “We could find our way back in the same way.”

“Perfect.” I nodded, but then I turned back to the scouts. “Did you get confirmation Livia is still among the prisoners?”

“They walk the captives in the courtyard once a day,” a raven-lady said with a nod of her bird head. “We saw Livia among them. She seems to be well.”

“That is wonderful news!” Una clapped her hands as she bounced up and down on the balls of her feet. “There is still time!”

“That’s not all,” an owl-woman said, and her large eyes were wide and unblinking. “They were preparing a transport caravan. We overheard the Cards discussing how they are going to be moving the prisoners to the Black Palace before the next full moon.”

“That doesn’t give us long,” Mae mused as she puffed on her long-stemmed pipe.

“How long?” I asked the group at large. I wasn’t familiar with the pattern of the moon in this strange dream world, but it had seemed like the moon had been full not that long ago. The two-lips only open beneath the light of the complete neon-green orb, and I tried to tally up the days that had passed since I’d been stung by the batbee.

“Several days, but not much more than that,” Doctor Kria supplied.

“It will take a day to reach the fortress,” Miss Maggie lamented as she threw her hands in the air. “We have already failed.”

“Not necessarily,” I said as I flashed the pig-chef a confident smile. “We can still do this, Mags. Have faith in the Dreamer.”

“You only have twenty women in your army,” Miss Maggie argued, and she crossed her arms over her chest. “It is a suicide mission.”

“Mae will help us train one more time before we leave,” I assured the anxious pig-lady.

“It’s not like you’re going with us,” Una interjected with a stubborn lift of her chin.

“That is precisely why I worry!” Miss Maggie huffed.

“You don’t have to worry about us, we have Alex!” Una insisted, and the cat-girl’s tail stiffened behind her as her violet eyes lit up with determination.

“Ladies!” I said in a loud voice, and I held up my hands to silence their bickering. “Everything is going to be just fine. I promise. We’ve been practicing and preparing for this moment since I first came to All-the-land. We’re ready. I can feel it.”

“Dreamer, Dreamer, Dreamer!” the gathered crowd of animal-people volunteers began to chant as they pumped their fists in the air.

Miss Maggie's lips stretched into a sideways smile as she considered my mini army, but after a moment, her shoulders sagged in surrender. "I suppose if anyone can do it, it's you."

"That's the spirit." I clapped her on the shoulder and flashed her a broad grin. "But you're more than welcome to come with us if you want to."

"I must stay with my daughter," Miss Maggie replied with a self-conscious dip of her head. "If it weren't for her..."

"I know, Mags," I assured her. "Your bravery is not in question."

We had one final training session with all the animal-people who wanted to participate in the prison break, and I focused on training in stealth maneuvers. Most of what I knew, I'd learned from video games, so it was nice to receive positive feedback from Mae about my creeping, sneaking movements.

After an hour or so of us working beneath the Dodo-woman's tutelage, we packed for our voyage across All-the-land to the Clover fortress. A knot began to form in my stomach as I considered what I was about to do, but I pushed all my anxious thoughts to the side as I met back up with the group at the mouth of the caves.

“Everyone ready?” I asked as I surveyed my motley group of animal-people. I had three bears, two beavers, a handful of squirrels, and the rest were birds, but it was more than I’d had during my first encounter with the Clover Cards, so I felt good about our chances.

Worst case scenario, we all died.

No big deal.

The rest of the residents of New Haven waved us off with solemn expressions, and I could tell they were all worried for our safety, but it had to be done. Ziti met us at the mouth of the cavern with the herd of ten friesians behind her, but even with the entire herd present, there weren’t enough mounts for my entire mini army. Still, we could cover more ground on horseback, even if we had to swap out turns as we went.

“The friesians would like to help,” Ziti squeaked.

“Thank you, Ziti,” I said with a grateful smile. “I’ll take all the help I can get.”

“I’m coming with you, too,” the furbæ informed me in a determined voice.

“No, Ziti,” I argued with a shake of my head. “It’s too dangerous for you. I need you to stay and watch over the others.”

“I can help!” Ziti insisted. “Even if I am small, that doesn’t mean I can’t do big things!”

The adorable ball of fur had a point. She’d come in handy more than once, so I sighed as I scooped her up and placed her on my shoulder. Ziti snuggled into my tunic happily, and I chuckled in amusement.

“Spoiled furbae,” I muttered as I moved to mount one of the friesians.

“Oh, your mount says he is strong enough to carry more than one,” Ziti added almost as an afterthought. “Maybe that way everyone will be able to ride.”

I grinned as I beckoned to Una. There was no one else whose ass I’d rather have pressed up against me, and she was situated in front of me a moment later. Lena clung to my shoulders, and Ziti hopped into her usual position as well. The buff bear-women all climbed aboard mounts of their own, and the other animals scurried into positions behind them. Everyone doubled up on the steeds, and then we were ready to depart on our quest.

“Alright, everyone!” I called out as I pumped my fist in the air. “Roll out!”

We traveled through the mountains and through precarious terrain, but it was worth it to avoid the dangers of the forest below the slopes. The

scouts had informed me that the nightmares grew more and more numerous with each passing day, and I wondered if the Dark King had heard of my coming.

How fast did information travel across All-the-land?

In any case, the Dark King and all of his minions would be entirely aware of my presence soon enough. There was no way I'd be able to break their captives free from imprisonment without getting some attention, but I didn't care. It would be worth it to heal all those suffering from the opposition effects.

Like Una's dad.

The cat-girl hadn't brought up her dad in conversation for a while, but I was sure she was eager to see him again. As we rode through the mountains, I began to mentally prepare myself for the introduction to the frisky feline's father, but I wasn't too worried about his reaction to me. I'd be there to save him and the other captives, so I was sure to make a good first impression.

"Hark, the deceiver's arrival," Mae sang suddenly, and her sweet soprano voice cut through the silence.

"Forsaken day breaks through the mourning trees," the others all instantly sang back at the Dodo-woman like they'd been practicing for this

moment already.

“Dreamer awaken,” Mae continued, and then everyone sang the next line in unison. “Crooked man of fate awaits thee on the stormy breeze.”

They all sang the rest of the song, and I listened attentively to every word. The whole thing went a little something like this:

Hark, the deceiver’s arrival! Forsaken day breaks through mourning trees.

Dreamer awaken! Crooked man of fate awaits thee on the stormy breeze.

Shadows go forth! Expunge the vibrancy of the land!

Dreamer awaken! Save the people of All-the-land.

From a distant world to us unknown, the Dreamer one day shall be born.

The Dreamer’s speech always so strange, and his bravery without challenge.

Immune to opposition’s might, no matter what, he will be right.

Shadows despair! The dreamer draws near.

Come, Oh weary Dreamer, to the All-the-land.

Come hither, our Dreamer, to these legions you command.

Then everyone began to belt out the chorus, and a shiver ran up my spine.

Do you hear us, hear us call out?

Will you save us? From the Fallout?

Come forth, Dreamer, come forth

Come north, Dreamer, come north

Go forth, Dreamer, go forth

Defeat the darkness in the north.

Come hither, fair Dreamer

And plant your seed

“What song is that?” I asked when they fell silent again.

“The prophecy song,” Una explained as she shrugged her shoulders.

“I’ve told you about it many times.”

“I didn’t realize the prophecy was a song everyone knew,” I said with an awed shake of my head. “Why haven’t you sung it before?”

“It’s mainly a traveling song,” Mae interjected. “And we haven’t been traveling for very long.”

“Plus, it’s a hopeful song,” Ziti squeaked. “And there hasn’t been much hope to go around until you arrived.”

The furbae's words struck a chord in my heart, and determination sizzled in my veins.

"Shadows despair," I muttered as I glared ahead toward the Clover fortress. "The dreamer draws near."

The horse-like creature beneath bunched its muscles as it traversed some rugged terrain, and I had to focus on gripping its sides with my legs for a moment. When I looked around, I realized we were coming to the end of the mountain range, and the ground was beginning to level out once more. We were walking down the side of a steep slope, but the way below was clear and unobstructed. I could see for a good distance, so I scanned the landscape for any signs of the Clover fortress.

I didn't see any castles, but I did spot a road made of black paving stones far below us at the bottom of the mountain. The lane cut across the landscape like a blade's edge, and I wondered how long it had been there.

"What is that?" I asked as I pointed to the black line across the landscape.

"The King's Road," Mae said in an ominous tone. "The Clover fortress lies on the other side of it."

"I've never crossed the King's Road before," Ziti squeaked in my ear, and I could feel her shivering on my shoulder. "It's scary to walk on

something the Dark King built. It's so black."

"Is he an emo punk or something?" I snorted. "He sure has a thing for black. I wonder if he listens to those whiny screaming bands."

"Screaming and music are not the same thing," Una said with a confused tilt of her head.

"Exactly," I said.

We finished our descent from the heights of the mountain range into the rolling foothills below, but it only took us a short while longer to reach the King's Road. The friesians nickered and tossed their heads as we drew near, and they danced around the edge in such a way that I could tell they weren't stepping foot on the black paving stones. This was where we said our goodbyes to the loyal mounts who had carried us through the mountains.

My companions and I dismounted, gave the friesians lots of pets, and waved goodbye as the horse-like creatures trotted back to their secret field of clover. Then my small army and I turned toward the King's Road with determined steps.

I wasn't going to let some black bricks throw me off.

Besides, the Clover fortress was on the other side, so all we had to do was cross it. We moved forward on foot, but I could feel the eyes of my

followers watching my every move. I couldn't show any signs of fear or weakness. I had to be a good example for them.

I marched across the King's Road with my shoulders squared and my head held high, and everyone followed after me with hurried steps. Then we pressed onward into the bleak, bare landscape. The terrain was completely monochrome on this side of the road, and I assumed nightmares were running rampant. As far as the eye could see, there was nothing but the emptiness of the land. It seemed as though the light was leached from the very sky the instant we crossed the King's Road, and twisted shadows from the clouds above danced across the ground.

Is this what All-the-land would look like if the Dark King wasn't stopped?

I had to do something to save this magical dream world from the big bad emo guy, but I didn't even know where to start on such a large task, so I refocused on the current mission.

Then the Clover fortress came into view.

Chapter Seventeen

I stood on a low hill overlooking the fortress of the Clover Queen, and an ominous feeling settled into the pit of my stomach. The monstrous castle rose from the barren landscape like a house of cards, and the daunting black walls cut across the empty plain in the shape of a three-leaf-clover. Everything was colorless, like the nightmares that roamed All-the-land had already sucked all the life out of anything that once existed there. No trees or plants dotted the landscape, and nothing stood between us and the fortress to hide behind.

We were completely exposed.

Fortunately, the fortress was still far enough away from us that anyone on the walls wouldn't be able to see us, so we were safe, for now.

"Where is the sewer entrance?" I asked as I turned to Una. "Can it be seen from the walls?"

"I believe so," the cat-girl sighed. "I escaped at night, but there were still Clovers after me for a long time. Then they sent out the Sniffer Snatcher. I would have been doomed if it weren't for you, Alex."

I drew an outline of a clover shape on the ground, and I pointed to the stem. "The bird-scouts said this is the only way in or out, but they didn't

know about the sewer. We can still catch them by surprise, but if they see us from the walls before we get inside, then it's all over before it even starts."

"What you need is a good distraction," Mae mused as she took a long pull from her pipe, and a moment later, her face was shrouded in smoke. "I will do it."

"Hold on," I said. "We need to come to a decision together. I like the idea of a distraction, though. What do you have in mind?"

"I attack the front gates," Mae declared as she jabbed the mouthpiece of her pipe at the drawing I'd made on the ground. "I challenge the Queen of Clovers to one-on-one combat."

"Uhhh, no," I sighed.

"She'll never accept, and she'll just send legions of Cards out to fight you," Ziti squeaked, and her entire little body vibrated with fear. "Mae, you can't go alone!"

"That's why we are here, is it not?" Shelli the bear-woman asked.

"True," I said as I scratched at the growing stubble on my chin. "If we separate, we can keep their eyes locked on the main gate while the rest of us sneak inside the sewage tunnels."

"A wise plan, Dreamer," Mae complimented. "I will follow your command to my death."

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” I chuckled.

Then we went about the beginning stages of our plan. Mae took the majority of our small army, and they geared up in preparation for their frontal attack while Una, Lena, Ziti, and I got ready for our stealth mission.

We waited until everyone was in place, and once I heard a long whistle from Mae, which was our signal, the four of us skirted around to the back side of the fortress.

I followed behind Una as the cat-girl scurried across the landscape, but then she began to search the ground. I wasn’t sure what exactly she was looking for, so I felt helpless as I waited and kept my head on a swivel, but then she rushed forward to lift something from the ground.

It was a metallic lid that had blended in with the dark, lifeless dirt, and when the cat-girl lifted it, a hole was revealed beneath. I peered into the darkness with growing trepidation, but then I heard the sounds of battle in the background. Mae and the others were already involved in combat with the Clover Cards, and now it was up to us to do the rest.

I just hoped they could hold out long enough for us to get out with the prisoners.

I cast one last glance around me, but I didn’t see any enemies, so I followed Una down into the darkness with Lena and Ziti in tow. Once we

were at the bottom of the ladder, my feet squished into wetness, and I grimaced since I knew what it was. The smell was rancid, and I wished desperately for something to clog my nose, but nothing manifested magically before me.

Oh, well.

We only had to stand it for a short while, and then once we returned to New Haven, we could all scrub the filth from our bodies.

I splashed through the water behind the swishing tail of the cat-girl for a while, and then we came to a junction in the pipes. Una looked both ways and sniffed curiously, but then she took the path to the left. We continued onward in the dark for a time, but I kept bumping into Una's back, so we eventually decided to light one of the torches we'd brought along with us.

The sewage tunnels proved to be maze-like in nature, and we had to double back a couple of times when we encountered dead ends. I trusted Una completely, though, so I trudged on behind her without question. I was sure she'd been in a state of confusion when she'd escaped, and I was just happy she was able to find the sewage entrance at all.

After what felt like forever, we came across another ladder leading up to a metal circle, and Una did a victory dance as she turned to me with a

brilliant smile.

“We have arrived at the entrance to the basement,” the cat-girl declared as she puffed out her chest with pride. “The dungeon is above the basement level, so we still have a little ways to go, but at least our feet will be on dry floors from here on out.”

“Too bad they’re already soaked,” I chuckled. “But I’ll be happy to get out of the sewers. Lead the way, babe.”

Una grinned before she scurried up the ladder, and I noticed she’d managed to keep her tail dry during our trek through the muck, but then I followed behind her with Lena wrapped around my torso and Ziti on my shoulder. I stuck the torch in a crevice in the wall at the bottom of the ladder, and then I climbed the rungs to the top.

The cat-girl waited for me at the top of the ladder, and her large violet orbs peered around into the darkness. “Hurry!”

“I’m coming,” I said as I pushed myself off the final rung and into the basement level of the Clover fortress.

“What next?” Ziti squeaked in a curious voice.

“The dungeon?” Lena guessed.

“That’s right,” Una confirmed with a nod. “This way!”

Then the cat-girl led us away from the manhole cover, and I finally got a good look at the room around me. It seemed like a maintenance room, with buckets, brooms, and mops piled in the corner. A basket full of nasty rags sat beside a thick wooden door, and it was to this portal that Una moved.

I drew my sword slowly and quietly, but I was dressed in the armor of a Clover Card ink-bag man, so my animal-people friends would be what gave me away more so than the weapon. Just as Una was opening the door, alarm bells began to ring out so loud the noise echoed through my helmet like someone had hit me on the head with a hammer.

“What is that?” Ziti whimpered in a voice drenched with fear.

“The attack at the front gate,” I reminded the furbae, and I reached up a finger to stroke her in a reassuring manner. “Mae and the others are drawing the queen’s forces away from us.”

“Oh, yes, I remember,” the furbae sighed and nuzzled into my finger. “Thank you, Alex. I am sorry. I believe I felt fear.”

“Careful,” Una hissed under her breath. “There could be nightmares in the castle as well. Don’t forget, they can sense fear.”

That made me think about the last time we’d seen the nightmare. It hadn’t chased after us, and at the time I thought it was because it couldn’t

see us, but maybe it had been because I wasn't as afraid.

"Wait, Una, listen up," I whispered. "Before we go out there, I have something I need to say. We have to be brave. Any sign of fear could alert the nightmares to our presence inside the castle."

"I am... brave," Lena said with a slow nod. "Thanks to... you."

"Me, too," Ziti whispered in my ear.

"You know I am." Una smirked, and one of her fangs stuck out over her lips at an adorable angle.

"You're all amazing," I murmured. "Let's do this."

Then we opened the door and crept out into the hallway. Una looked both ways before she led us to the right, but at least there were torches along the walls to illuminate the path. The walls were iron, the corridor was lined with doors, and it definitely had a dungeon ambiance.

The sound of dripping water echoed through the hallway, and Una walked with her steps timed to each drop's descent. I made every effort to muffle my movements, and while I felt I did a considerably good job despite the metal armor I wore, I was still much louder than the nimble cat-girl.

We came to a junction, and Una looked both ways as she sniffed the air. It seemed she was navigating purely by smell and memory, but I

supposed she didn't have much time to study the layout of the dungeon while she was a prisoner there since the Clover Cards had been forcing her to ingest potions against her will.

Then I heard the telltale sound of metal armor clanging behind us, and I tapped Una on the shoulder. When I had her gaze locked in mine, I jerked my chin toward the hallway we'd just come down, and her eyes widened in alarm.

"What do we do?" Una asked in an urgent whisper.

"Which way do we go?" I pressed as I gestured with my sword to the junction. "We could still outrun them."

Una nodded, but then she dashed down the corridor to the left, and I hurried after her. I cast a glance over my shoulder as we rounded another corner, and the Clover Card's head popped into view for a single instant.

I wasn't sure if he'd seen us, or if my disguise had worked, so I didn't stop.

"You there!" a voice called out from behind me. "You're going the wrong way! Everyone was summoned to the front gate!"

I ignored the call, and I gestured for Una to hurry up when she shot a glance at me over her shoulder. The two of us dashed down the door-lined

hallway, and I was growing more and more curious about what laid inside each portal.

Were they all full of prisoners?

How many would be strong enough to fight our way out?

Our first priority was to rescue the Potion Maker, Una's father, and the other people my girlfriend cared about. Then we would see about the rest of the cells.

Clanging armor echoed behind me, but the sound was drawing steadily closer, and I realized the Clover Card was coming after us.

I'd have to fight after all.

I turned to face the ink-bag bastard with a flick of my wrist, and in my next breath, I parried his heavy-handed overhead blow. Ziti spit in his face, and Lena reached out to smack him, but the blow did little other than annoy our enemy. Then my training with Mae kicked in, and I found myself slamming my heel into his ribcage.

The Clover Card flew backward, but I didn't give him time to recuperate. I followed up with a feigned swing to the right, and as soon as the Clover Card moved to block my fake attack, I tossed my sword into my left hand then shoved it into his neck.

Blood sprayed onto the walls, and I leapt backward to avoid being covered in the inky-black substance. Sewage was one thing, but I was sick of the Clover Cards dying all over me.

A second Clover Card man trotted down the hallway toward us, but Una rushed forward and withdrew her sword in one fluid movement. The next thing I knew, the cat-girl was standing over the bleeding corpse of the ink-bag man, and all was well.

“Wow, Una,” I said as my eyebrows lifted into my hairline. “You’ve really gotten better with a sword!”

“Mae taught me,” Una said as a self-conscious blush darkened her cherub cheeks. “But I’ve been practicing on my own, too.”

“Color me impressed,” I said with a wide grin, but then I realized she couldn’t see my face beneath the helmet I wore. “I’m proud of you.”

“Oh!” Una’s expression brightened, and her eyes filled with adoration. “Thank you, Alex.”

Then the cat-girl sashayed down the hallway past me, and her hips swayed with a confident attitude as she continued down the corridor.

Fuck, did I love her.

I hurried to catch up to Una, but my movements clanged with metallic echoes, so I slowed down once I was a few paces behind her. I

peered inside the window hole at the top of the iron doors that lined the hallway, but each cell I glanced inside was empty. I eventually stopped looking, and then we came to another junction.

Una sniffed the air, and her ears flattened against her head. “This is the place.”

“Oh?” I swallowed down the ominous feeling that rose in my throat, and I reached for her hand.

“Where they... Where they made me...” Una’s purple gaze fell to the ground, and I squeezed her fingers encouragingly. “The others can’t be far.”

“I’m right behind you, babe,” I said.

Una nodded decisively, and her shoulders were straight as she led the way down the right-hand corridor. I heard the sound of voices in the distance, but the words were too faint to make out. We passed by more cells, but I heard moans from inside the iron doors, so I knew these ones were occupied.

Una’s nose was moving non-stop, and her pace quickened as she rushed down the hallway. She was heading directly toward the sound of the voices, though, so I rushed behind her despite my loud ass armor.

“It’s your turn,” a masculine voice said.

“No, it’s not,” another argued.

We burst into a room where two Clover Cards sat across from each other at a table playing cards, and while the irony wasn't lost on me, I quickly dove into action.

I slid in front of Una and brandished my sword, but the two Cards jumped up from their game to draw their own weapons. Una wasn't about to be left out of the fight, though, and she slid into a position by my side in the same instant the two Cards attacked. Without their shields to identify their numbers, I wasn't sure exactly which Card they were, but it didn't really matter since they were going to die anyway.

Lena clung to my neck from behind, but Ziti murmured encouragement in my ear as she clung to my shoulder. I reminded myself that the two animal-women knew what they'd agreed to when we left on this mission, and then I refocused on the fight just in time to parry a blow from the Card to the right.

Una lunged forward and jabbed at the bastard to the left in the same moment, and the two of us slid into a graceful dance of blades. I hadn't had the opportunity to fight like this with Una before since she'd been suffering from the opposition effects of the agility potion, but I found myself in awe of her nimble finesse.

Was my sperm really magic?

I found myself growing more curious about the results of the doctor's research every time Una's effects subsided more, but I didn't have time to think about that now, so I refocused on the fight.

We eliminated the two enemies easily, and then we stood over the puddle of black, inky blood as we looked around the room. It was circular in shape, and the doors to the cells were just iron bars here, so it came as a shock when I found myself staring into an ancient feminine face.

She was a human.

"Livia!" Una gasped, and she rushed over to the bars to reach through. "Oh, Livia, you're alive!"

"Una?" The old woman who I assumed was the Potion Maker we were here to rescue blinked at the cat-girl in confusion. "What are you doing here?"

"We are here to rescue you!" Una said, and she beckoned me over. "I found the Dreamer! His name is Alex, and he's here to free you."

I gave the ancient old woman my most friendly smile, and I waved awkwardly as Livia scanned me up and down.

"I don't understand." The old woman shook her head.

"What do you mean?" Una tilted her head to the side. "I've explained it."

Something itched at the corner of my brain, and I sighed as the thought formed.

“Una,” I said in a soft voice. “She’s suffering from opposition.”

Una’s eyes brightened with realization, but then they filled with sorrow. “A wisdom potion. Of course.”

“We’ll fix her up,” I assured my cat-girlfriend. “I promise, but first we need to get the fuck out of dodge, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, Alex, you should give her some of your magic seed!” Una’s ears wagged with excitement.

“I’m not going to fuck some old lady in a dungeon,” I sighed. “They don’t even do that on Pornhub.”

“Such strange language,” Livia murmured, and her eyes were glassy with confusion. “You sound like the Dreamer, but that would be impossible. He doesn’t exist.”

Yeah, she was definitely out of her mind.

This was going to make my task a little harder since I would have to find a way to continuously convince the Potion Maker to come with us, but first I had to break her free.

Good thing I had a potion on hand for just this scenario.

We'd thought of literally everything during the planning stages, including placing a couple of key potions inside my pack. I pulled my bag off my shoulders, and I lifted the visor of my helm so I could look better. Then I dug around inside the pouch in search of the container I wanted, but my fingers found purchase around the rim a moment later, and I withdrew a glass bottle labeled "strength."

I grinned at Una, and the cat-girl returned the expression as I tilted the bottle to my lips. I only drank a sip since I didn't want to waste any of the rare beverage, and then I replaced the cork stopper.

I felt energy coursing through my veins in my next breath, and I inhaled greedily to fill my enhanced lungs. Then I stepped forward and gripped the iron bars of Livia's cell door. With a grunt, I heaved two of the bars apart, but for a moment nothing happened. Then the rods began to stretch and creak as they bent into curved lines, but I didn't stop until there was more than enough room for the Potion Maker to slip through.

"What are you doing?" Livia asked with a dazed expression.

"Saving you," I said as I reached out a hand to help her to her feet.

Livia didn't lose her confused look as she accepted my hand and rose to her feet, but Una quickly came forward and supported the old woman upon her shoulders.

“My father?” Una asked in a hopeful voice as she glanced around at the other cells.

My eyes followed her gaze, and I saw a rabbit-woman, two sets of blue eyes peering at me from the shadows, and a tiny man in a cage hanging from the ceiling I hadn’t noticed before.

“Um, is that your dad?” I asked as I pointed to the bird cage with the tiny person inside.

Una’s eyes were hopeful as they lifted to the ceiling, but I saw the disappointment in them immediately.

“No,” she sighed. “But I recognize him. He used to live in Havenwood. I heard he was the last person who took a big potion. Before you, of course.”

“Let’s free everyone,” I said, and I crossed the distance to the bird cage.

Una nodded and moved to the cage full of women-creatures, and a short while later, our little group was ready to leave.

The rabbit-woman’s pink nose quivered as did her tail, and I realized I could sense the fear radiating off her. The two sets of blue eyes belonged to a pair of short, blonde twin women, and I couldn’t help notice how attractive they all were, but I didn’t have the time to take in all their details.

“Everyone, this is Alex,” Una announced with a proud grin. “The Dreamer.”

The newly freed prisoners gasped, and jaws fell slack all around. I smiled sheepishly beneath their scrutiny, and then I signaled to Una.

“Has anyone seen my father?” The cat-girl’s chin quivered, but I could see her swallow down a lump in her throat in an effort to be brave.

“He was transported to another fortress,” the white rabbit-woman said, but then her shoulders tensed, and Una gave her a stern look. “I-I don’t know much... I just overheard the Cards talking when they moved him. Another Queen needed men to repair her section of the King’s Road. You’ll still save us without him, right?”

“Of course,” Una sighed, but I could tell she was disappointed her dad wasn’t included among the prisoners.

“We’ll find him,” I assured her. “I won’t stop looking until we bring him home.”

“Me, too!” Ziti added.

“I’m... in,” Lena drawled.

“Thanks.” Una smiled and seemed to brighten a little. “But let’s just start with this lot.”

“We need to get out of here,” I agreed. “We can save the rest of the introductions for when we’re all safe.”

“Alright,” Una breathed, but she had a new pep in her step as she returned to Livia’s side.

The white-tailed rabbit-woman glanced fearfully from side to side with every step she took, so I took up a position behind her to urge her on. She flashed me a terrified glance, and I looked down to see myself through her eyes, in Clover Card armor and covered in their blood. I was sure I wasn’t exactly the face of the Dreamer they were expecting, but they’d understand more later.

In the meantime, it was time to get the fuck out of the Clover fortress.

Una led us through the maze-like corridors of the castle back to the entrance to the sewers below, but the twins hesitated before climbing down into the shadows.

“Oh, nooo, Dee, do you smell that?” The twin who’d spoken flicked her blonde hair over her shoulder and wrinkled her nose in disgust. “There is no way I am going down there.”

“It’s the way to freedom,” I hissed.

“Don’t yell at Daa!” the other twin interjected in a loud voice. “She’s had a long day.”

Holy shit, they were just like the valley girls I used to have the hots for in college. I swallowed down the moisture that suddenly filled my mouth, and I gestured to the entrance to the sewers.

“Poop, or death?” I asked. “It’s up to you, but this is the only chance you’re going to get. Poop will wash off. Death? Not so much.”

“Ugh, fine!” Daa huffed, and she swung her legs over the edge of the hole. “Dee, you better come with me, or I would rather die!”

I rolled my eyes at the dramatic flair the blonde twins already had, and then I followed them down with the tiny man, Lena, and Ziti in my arms. I had to maneuver the ladder with one hand, but I didn’t mind.

We were on our way to safety.

Concern for Mae and the others’ safety filled my chest, but I took a deep, calming breath and reminded myself that I would be with them shortly. There was no way a few Clover Cards would best the Dodo-woman in battle, no matter how many men they had.

I fetched my torch, and then we traversed the canals of the sewers. Una once again took the lead, but I remembered the path from the way in, so it was easy for me to keep pace with her. Livia and the others struggled

to trudge through the muck, and the loud complaints from the twins echoed down the tunnels in both directions.

If there were any Clover Cards nearby, we'd be found out for sure, but I was more worried about calling for the other half of my followers to retreat before they were injured.

We turned down a junction, and I nearly barreled into Una's backside as she came to a halt. The muck splashed against our calves, but I couldn't tell what had caused her to stop so suddenly.

"Alex," she whispered in a barely audible voice. "There's someone in the tunnel up ahead."

"Shit," I said as I stepped in front of her.

A huge, muscular, bare chested man stood in the sewer tunnel with his back to us. He wore a black hood and black leather pants but nothing else, and his muscles rippled as he gripped a long executioner-style axe. On the monstrous man's bare back was etched a large A with a single black clover between his shoulder blades. It looked like an Ace of Clovers to my eyes, and it stood between us and freedom.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The dude looked jacked up on steroids, and even with the strength potion, I wasn't entirely sure I was a match for him.

I also didn't know how much longer I had on the potion buff timer.

I was the only thing standing between the Ace and the prisoners I'd freed, so I didn't have a lot of other options. I'd have to take him out as fast as I could if I wanted to see them to safety, but it could very well be the death of me, too.

I swallowed down the lump of fear that rose in my throat, and I put on a brave face for the women who huddled behind me.

"Get back down the tunnels a bit," I whispered to my friends. "And wait for me to signal it's safe to come out."

"What if you never signal?" the white rabbit-woman practically sobbed.

"I'm the Dreamer." I gave her an encouraging smile, even though I didn't entirely feel confident about my chances at success. "Don't worry."

I waited until my group of newly freed prisoners were safely out of sight past the last junction we'd crossed, and then I slowly slid my sword from its sheath.

I had to kill this guy, or my friends would get captured again.

The instant I began to advance down the tunnel, the Ace's head swiveled toward me, and I froze.

Holy shit, this guy was bigger than Dwayne Johnson and twice as ripped.

I shook my head to dispel my negative thoughts, and I cleared my mind as I headed toward the Ace at a dead run.

“Fuck off!” I shouted as I swung my sword in a wide arch across his massive bare chest, which was also tattooed with a large black letter A.

The Ace grunted, and he brought his humongous axe up to block the blow. My sword rattled in my grasp, but with the strength potion still in my veins, I barely felt the impact.

We both backed up a couple of paces and appraised each other as we circled, but the muck created a slippery foundation for a fight, so I was careful with my footing.

Then the Ace charged for me with his giant axe held over his head like it was as light as a feather, but I caught the metal edge against my sword and easily held off the blow. The Ace had no eyes beneath the black hood covering his face, and I wasn't sure if that was better or worse as I stared into the void of the mask.

I heaved backward with a groan, but the Ace quickly rebounded. He swung his axe, and I blocked it with my sword, but after a few more parries, I began to feel my strength ebb.

Oh, fuck. The potion was wearing off.

I needed to end this, and soon, or I wouldn't be able to match the giant's strength anymore, so I jumped into an offensive stance and lunged forward. I caught the tip of my blade against the Ace's massive bicep, and black blood seeped from the thin scratch, but I had to duck to avoid his grappling hands.

The Ace had dropped one hand from the handle of his massive axe to grab at me, but I rolled through the nastiness on the floor and out of his reach. Then I popped back up behind him, and I slashed my sword across his broad, bare back. A plume of black, inky blood spouted from the wound, and a guttural cry came from the beneath the Ace's hood.

I'd injured him, at least, so I had hope I could win this fight.

A hand as big as a pumpkin flew through the air and collided with my face, and my neck whipped to the side a half second before my body smacked into the wall. The air left my lungs like a bagpipe getting slammed with a sledgehammer, and I fell to my knees in the muck.

I didn't feel much pain because of the strength potion, but my vision was still spinning, and my ears still rang like someone smacked me with a cymbal.

"That all you got?" I gasped as I stood back up.

I wasn't going to let these innocent people become prisoners of the Clovers again, not after I'd worked so hard to save them. It was kill or be killed, and the latter wasn't an option.

I was the Dreamer, and I was going to save All-the-land from the darkness.

Then I lunged for the Ace with a primitive growl echoing from my lips, and I tackled him around the waist. I hauled the massive man off his feet and above my head, and then I Hulk Hoganed him against the wall. The Ace crashed into the stone while dust and debris exploded from around him, and he slumped his head down for a long moment.

"Game over, newb." I strode toward the Ace and lifted my sword to plunge into his heart, but then the massive man's fist moved unbelievably fast and wrapped around my throat.

"Ha. Ha. Ha." The Ace's voice sounded like a tuba getting dragged along gravel, and he gripped the shaft of his executioner's axe in one hand as he casually lifted me off my feet with the other.

I clawed at his gloved fingers, and I managed to maneuver one of my hands around his digits. My lungs were burning, and my vision was beginning to blur around the edges, so I knew I didn't have much time

before the Ace snapped my neck. I grabbed onto my enemy's finger, and then I yanked backward with all my strength.

There was a sound like twisted celery, and the beastly Ace dropped me into the sewage as he let out a low moan.

Before he had time to recover fully, I stabbed upward with my blade, and I caught him between the legs with a heavy thrust of my weapon. Black, inky blood poured down my steel, but I still twisted as I removed my sword.

The Ace fell to his knees, and the muck around us was as black as a midnight sky from the excessive amount of blood he'd already lost, but the muscular card man tightened his grip on his axe and used it like a walking stick to pull himself to his feet. Again, I drove my sword into his fake flesh, and once more, blood seeped from the wound to add to the blackness below us.

My enemy swung his giant double-headed axe at my head in a final effort to achieve victory, but I met his metal with my own. This time, my feet slid backward from the impact, and I realized my strength was gone.

Fuck. It was now or never.

My heart raced, and I thought it would escape from behind my rib cage since my organ was pounding against it so hard, but I inhaled as much

oxygen as I could as I focused all my remaining energy into holding the Ace off.

The Ace backed me into the wall, and he pressed against me until the shaft of his axe laid across my throat. I struggled to breath as I pushed against him, but then I let my arms drop to my side. My enemy seemed confused by this and pulled back ever so slightly, which gave me just enough space to jam my sword upward into the spot where a human would have a heart. I wasn't so sure about the Clover Cards' anatomy, and this Ace was different from any other I'd encountered so far, but I had to do something to get the advantage again. My limbs were heavy from exertion, but I wasn't going to give up.

I yanked my sword out, and a plume of thick, inky blood sprayed from the now gaping hole, but still my opponent did not cry out. He seemed frozen in place, as though slowly realizing his dire situation.

Then the shaft of the double-headed axe loosened against my throat, and I sucked in a grateful breath before I stabbed into the Ace again, and again, until I was covered in his gore.

"Die, you juiced out motherfucker!" I stabbed into him as he stumbled back, but I didn't relent my attacks even when he crashed to his knees.

I jabbed my blade into his throat, his shoulders, his gut, and his heart, until his bare chest was so covered in black blood I could no longer discern the A tattooed there.

The Ace crashed face first into the water, and I was nearly toppled over from the motion, but I hopped back up and waited for my enemy to move again.

He didn't.

I'd won.

Chapter Eighteen

If you'd like to see a map of All-the-Land, you can find it in my Facebook group (Search for Logan Jacobs in Facebook Groups), or on my Patreon (search Google for Patreon + Logan Jacobs).

I breathed a deep sigh of relief and leaned against the tunnel wall as my breathing slowly grew normal once more, but I was so out of it, I didn't even notice Una and the others approach.

The curious feline's eyes bulged as she took in the remains of the Ace, and she placed a gentle hand against my arm.

"Thank you, Alex," she murmured in a reverent tone. "You are truly incredible."

The freed prisoners all eyed me with obvious awe, except for the Potion Maker, who stared absently at the ceiling.

"Let's get out of here," I sighed as I wrapped my sword-free arm around Una's shoulders.

A short while later, we popped out of the ground through the hole, and I scanned the empty landscape before I allowed the others to emerge. I

ushered them in the direction of the King's Road, and then I rushed across the distance to the meeting point.

The sounds of battle greeted my ears before the conflict graced my vision, but I could easily spot Mae as she flourished her weapon with a triumphant air. She was surrounded by Clover Cards, but the others were faring just as well. The bear-women worked together to rip apart the Two of Clovers, and the bird-women were dropping rocks from the air.

I whistled loud and crisp, and I saw Mae's head swivel in my direction.

"Retreat!" the Dodo-woman cried out in a loud voice, and I sighed in relief.

"Dreamer!" a voice suddenly screeched above the din of the fight, and my gaze swept across the battlefield to the ramparts of the castle where a woman in a black dress stood. "I'll get you for this!"

The Queen of Clovers wore the only color visible around her shoulders in the form of a bright yellow robe fluttering in the breeze. A radiant jeweled crown sat upon her head, and the light reflected on it like a prism. Then she raised a wooden staff topped with a bright yellow gemstone until it also caught the sun rays.

I took a deep breath as I marched forward with my chin lifted.

I wasn't about to cower before the Queen of Clovers.

"Yes, I am the Dreamer!" I shouted. "I have come to end the reign of the Dark King, and I will destroy any who ally themselves with him. Pick your side now, Queen of Clovers! For the next time you see me, it will be your life on the line."

A part of me wanted to rush up to the ramparts and cut her head off right now, but I knew that wasn't a smart plan. Our mission had been to free the Clovers' captives and secure the Potion Maker, and we'd done that. We'd succeeded mostly due to stealth and the element of surprise, but we weren't ready for a full-on battle

Yet. But that would soon change. I'd make sure of it.

The Queen of Clovers stood glaring down at me from the top of the wall of her fancy castle, but she didn't seem to have anything else to say.

I had meant every word.

I was the Dreamer the prophecy had foretold, and I was going to kick the Dark King's ass.

A huge glowing ball suddenly rocketed from the top of the wall, and it smashed into the battlefield to burst into a massive explosion of flames, which scattered Clover Cards everywhere. The sheer force of the impact caused a wind gust to nearly knock me off my feet, but I held my footing

firm as my eyes leapt to the Queen of Clovers. By the queen's side were two smoking canons, and my eyes widened as I watched several Clover Cards reload them.

“Shiiiiittttt!” I shouted. “They’ve got canons! Run!”

I should have known the Queen of Clovers wouldn't have just let us get away without retaliation, but I hadn't expected her to be packing such potent fire power.

Mae and the others rushed across the battlefield toward me, and I hurried to guard their retreat. I parried the blows from a couple of Clover Cards while Mae ushered the animal-people to safety, and then we stood side by side and eliminated any who chose to come after us.

The two of us danced with our blades, and the metallic song of sword hitting sword filled the crisp, tasteless air. Adrenaline coursed through my veins, and I was grinning from ear to ear despite being locked in conflict with some animated bags of ink.

Two more enemies fell to my blade, but the muscles in my shoulders began to ache from the constant parrying, and I eyed the ceaseless line of Clover Cards with growing trepidation.

There was no way we could outrun them on foot with the prisoners having to move at a slower pace, and without the friesians, we were stuck. I

wracked my mind for ideas while I fought off blow after blow from the Clover Cards, but then I heard the nicker of one of the horse-like creatures from behind me, and I swiveled to see the rest of my companions mounted.

“They crossed the King’s Road!” I shouted to Mae. “Let’s get the fuck out of here!”

“We can do this, Dreamer!” Mae cackled with battle lust as she swung her sword like a battleaxe into the skull of a Clover Card.

A fountain of black, inky blood sprayed from the wound like a geyser and drenched the Dodo-woman from beak to tail, and the other Clover Cards seemed a little hesitant to rush forward after that, which gave me an opening to grab Mae by the arm and pull her away from the battle.

“Come on, the others need us,” I urged. “We can’t win this war today, but we’ve already won the fight!”

“You and I can destroy the Clovers once and for all!” Mae chortled with delight before she turned to lunge at a brave Card guy who’d crept up on us while we talked.

The ground was littered with the armored corpses of the ink-bag bastards, but I held no sympathy in my heart for their losses. It wasn’t like they were people, after all, but they’d given me more fighting experience

than I ever could have gotten from a video game on Earth, so for that, I was grateful.

Mae and I killed a couple of Clover Cards as we backed toward the steeds, but then we managed to climb up behind our friends. The friesians took off at a gallop, and we all had to cling to their manes to stay on, but it was good to put some distance between us and the fortress.

“What changed?” I said to Ziti, who still rode upon my shoulder, as we rode to the south at breakneck speed. “Why did they decide to cross the King’s Road?”

“You inspired them!” Ziti squealed. “They wanted to be brave for the Dreamer. Also, I heard one mention some nightmares returning to the castle passing by them, and I think they all got pretty spooked.”

Oh shit, there were nightmares nearby?

I scanned the bleak landscape closely, but I didn’t see any hooded figures in the monochrome scene, so I released the breath I hadn’t realized I’d been holding. Something itched in the back of my mind, but no coherent thought formed, so I dismissed the feeling with a shake of my head.

Our friesian friends dashed across the King’s Road, and they were moving so fast their hooves barely touched the paving stones, but after a quick glance behind us, I determined we were no longer being followed.

Still, better safe than sorry, so once we were a good distance away from the black-and-white landscape, I signaled for a halt.

“We need to mask our tracks,” I said, and my eyes swept over my ragtag group.

Livia and Una rode on one friesian together, while the white-rabbit-woman rode with the twins and the tiny man, but the freed prisoners seemed to be in good spirits, despite shivering in their rags. Mae sat behind a bear-woman, and of course, Lena and Ziti were still with me. The rest of the animal-people shared the remainder of the steeds, but many had to double or triple up. Fortunately, the heaviest among them were the bear-women, and they each rode a mount of their own.

“A golden idea,” Mae replied. “But how?”

“Once we hit the trees, we’ll cut a branch down with a fair number of leaves on it,” I explained as I remembered doing something similar in a video game. “It won’t be perfect, but it’ll confuse them, and then we can double back before we approach the caves.”

“They’ll look for us in Havenwood,” Una mused as she tapped a finger against her chin. “Maybe if we head in that direction for a while, it will throw off the scent a little longer.”

“Good idea.” I nodded. “Which way is Havenwood?”

“Directly west of here,” Una explained as she pointed to the horizon. “I kept the sun at my back when I left, but I did go a little off course.”

“Yeah, you were down by the Happy Fields to the south,” I recalled. “But I’m glad you were or we would never have met.”

“Can you imagine how awful that would be?” Una shook her head to dispel the thought.

“Oh, love birds,” Mae said in a sing-song voice. “Let us move swiftly away!”

“Right,” I chuckled. “Toward Havenwood, then.”

The friesian beneath my legs tossed its head and nickered in response, and then our small group was on the move again. I was proud of everything we’d accomplished so far, and the fact that I was returning with even more people than I left with told of how successful we were.

Not a single life had been lost to the distraction.

We rode through the night and into the morning, but the sun stayed upon our backs for a while. When the tops of the fungi in Mushroom Valley were visible to my right, I veered a little more to the left to aim for Havenwood.

It was mid-day when we approached the giant sequoia, and I considered giving the freed prisoners a break from riding in the ghost town

we'd deserted. I didn't want to confuse them all when it was time to leave again, though, and with the Potion Maker being in an inebriated state, that was easy enough to do already.

We paused to glance up at the three-hundred-foot-tall tree with bittersweet expressions, but then we continued on to the waterfall.

"Wait, where are we going?" Livia asked in her confused manner. "Why aren't we stopping?"

"Havenwood isn't hidden anymore," Una explained in a comforting voice as she rubbed the ancient woman's arms. "We made a new town, and it's called New Haven. You'll love it. Don't worry, we'll be there soon."

Since we were taking a longer route than we had when we'd departed, it took us more than a day to reach New Haven. Plus, we had to go slower to sweep the path behind us clear of tracks. I stayed on guard all night while we camped, but the thought of losing the people I'd just rescued wouldn't allow me to sleep. Una joined me shortly before dawn, and the beautiful cat-girl twirled her fingers between mine as we sat to watch the sunrise.

"How is everyone doing?" I asked with a worried frown. "Does Livia remember you yet?"

“No.” Una shook her head sadly. “It may be a while before she is back to her old self.”

“It’ll be okay,” I assured her. “We’ll get everyone back to New Haven, and Doctor Kria will look after them.”

“Thank you, Alex, for saving my friends,” Una murmured in a husky voice. “You’re amazing. Just like I always envisioned the Dreamer to be...”

“Una, I would do anything for you,” I insisted as I squeezed her fingers warmly, but then I leaned forward to place a soft kiss upon her delicious lips. “You’re my cat-girl, after all.”

“And you’re my Dreamer,” Una replied as her eyes filled with adoration.

We reached New Haven the next day, and a crowd of animal-people rushed out of the mouth of the cavern to greet us. Livia and the other freed prisoners were hoisted up into the air and carried inside while joyful chants filled the air.

“They did it! They did it! They saved everyone!”

“Hooray! Livia has returned!”

“What about us?” Dee whined. “Didn’t you miss my sister and I?”

“Yes, we were captives, too, you know,” Daa added. “I am starving! When’s dinner? Wait, what’s for dinner?”

“It’s good to have you two back,” Miss Maggie said in her usual cross-armed position. “No matter how annoying you can be, you’ll always be a part of our family.”

I took a moment to get a closer look at the people I’d just saved now that we were finally safe, and they all seemed to be well-enough to not need emergency medical attention.

The twins looked practically human, and identical to each other, so it was hard to tell them apart, but they appeared to be around their late teens or early twenties. Long, straight blonde hair hung down to their asses, which were perky and curved in all the right places, and their eyes were as green as emerald gemstones. They wore stained gray tunics that hung to their knees, and I had a feeling they would be among the first to demand clean clothes.

The white-rabbit-woman cast fearful and anxious glances around at everything, and I could tell she still didn’t feel completely safe, but she wasn’t shaking the way she’d been in the Clover fortress, so I saw that as an improvement. She had curly white hair around her head and the biggest, bluest eyes I’d ever seen. Her nose was pink, and two large teeth poked over the edge of her lips. She was shorter than the others, shorter even than Una, but she looked perfectly proportional to me still.

The tiny man wore a loincloth and nothing else, but he looked to be an older man, maybe mid-fifties, if the bulging gut was any indication. He had no hair and gray eyebrows, but it was hard to make out any more details than that from this distance and his small stature.

Livia was one of the oldest-looking people I'd ever met, and her wrinkled face hid beneath long silver locks. Her eyes were a pale green, and I wondered if she was related to the twins at all.

I chuckled in amusement as the animal-people carried away the white-rabbit-woman, the twins, the tiny man, and the Potion Maker. Then I slung my arm across Una's shoulders and followed them inside the cavernous entrance to New Haven.

It was going to be a lot of fun getting to know them all better.

A short while later, the freed friends had been carted away to the temporary medical center, and the rest of my companions and I were relaxing around the fire.

"Now, we can make the 'heal others' potion!" Una announced after she finished telling the epic tale of our prison break adventure. "Well, as soon as Livia is feeling more herself again. I don't think I would trust her to make a single brew right now."

“The Clover Cards will come for her,” Miss Maggie warned. “Potion Makers are rarer than the potions themselves these days, and we’ve taken both from them recently. The Clover Queen won’t forget it.”

“I hope she doesn’t.” I grinned. “I hope she comes after me on my turf. We could take her, and her bastard Cards, too.”

I was filled with the bravado only a victory could ensure, but I meant every word. I’d sworn to defeat the Dark King and free All-the-land from his tyranny, and that was exactly what I planned to do.

I’d already proven what I was capable of, and now I just needed to eliminate the shadow of evil that hovered over this magical fantasy world. Then I could spend my days enjoying the hot babes I was somehow surrounded by.

My life was like a wild fantasy dream come true.

And I was never crawling out of the rabbit hole again.

“Come on, Alex,” Una said in a suggestive tone with a seductive smile stretched across her lips. “Let’s go home.”

“Let’s.” I smirked, and I let the cat-girl tug me toward our treehouse for a night of well-deserved revelry.

Una led me with eager steps to our new treehouse, and the two of us hurried up into the branches with wide grins. I stared up at her ass as she

progressed up the ladder, and she was barely inside the structure when I grabbed her from behind and trailed kisses along her neck.

“Mmm,” Una moaned as she tilted her head to give me full access to her skin. “That feels good...”

“I haven’t even gotten started yet,” I murmured in a husky voice full of desire, and my cock was already pushing against the restraint of my pants.

“Just the thought of you makes me tingle deep inside,” Una informed me as she smoothly slid around to wrap her arms around neck.

The beautiful cat-girl’s lips parted ever so slightly as she gazed into my eyes, but I could not resist the pull to kiss her, and a moment later, we were locked in a passionate embrace.

I slowly backed her toward the bed, and she tumbled onto the mattress when the back of her calves hit the edge. I watched her breasts bounce from the motion, and then I gestured to her garments.

“Take all that bullshit off,” I instructed. “I don’t want anything standing between me and your body.”

“Yes, Dreamer,” Una giggled as she hastily undid the fasteners for her minimal armor and clothes.

“You got it.” I dropped the baggy pants to display my fully erect member. My head throbbed toward Una, as though leading me toward my heart’s desires, but I needed no prompting to join the now naked cat-girl on the bed.

Our lips met again, and our tongues danced a tango as the kiss deepened and lulled. The taste of salt was strong, but it was uniquely Una, so I devoured her with fervor. Then I slid my fingers south, and I caressed the smooth muscles of her abdomen as I sought the treasure between her legs.

Una spread herself open for me as soon as she realized my intentions, and my fingers slid against her already dripping entrance as a groan escaped my lips.

“Fuck, you’re already so wet!” I chuckled into her neck, and then I kissed the hollow of her throat while I thrust my fingers deep inside her tunnel.

“Ohhhh!” Una gasped and arched her back to meet the motion of my fingers, and she ground her mound into the palm of my hand.

“You like that?” I murmured as I bent down and flicked my tongue across her pert nipples, and the buds instantly hardened beneath my mouth. “Who’s your savior?”

“You are!” Una’s breaths were coming in ragged gasps as I worked my fingers inside her entrance, but she inhaled sharply when my pussy-slick digits discovered her node of pleasure.

I flicked it with my pointer finger until Una’s legs started to twitch as she climaxed, but I also wanted to feel her orgasm around my shaft, so I quickly repositioned myself between her legs.

Una seemed to sense my intentions yet again, and she wrapped her legs around my lower back to draw me inside her. Her violet orbs were full of trust and adoration as she peered up at me, and we both hissed with pleasure as I slid my cock inside her tight little pussy.

“You feel amazing,” I growled as I slid slowly out, and I claimed her mouth as I slammed my entire length inside her once more.

Una moaned into my mouth, and I swallowed the sound with ravenous hunger.

“Oh, Alex!” Una gasped when I finally let her come up for air. “I am yours and only yours!”

“Forever,” I clarified as the intensity in my balls began to grow, but then Una’s pussy spasmed around my shaft, and I almost lost control.

“Yes, yes, yes!” Una chanted as her head whipped from side to side, and her body convulsed beneath my weight. “Forever!”

I stared deep into her eyes as we both climaxed simultaneously, and I shuddered with pleasure as I sprayed her womb with my magic seed. I pumped a few more times as I emptied my balls inside her tight pussy, and her tunnel walls continued to spasm with each movement I made.

Una's eyes were unfocused as she stared at the ceiling, and I laid my head on her chest while she stroked my hair absently.

"Soon, you will heal us all with your seed," the cat-girl murmured into the dark shadows of our treehouse. "And All-the-land will rejoice at your name."

I fell asleep with her words echoing in my ears.

I was the Dreamer, and I would save All-the-land. The words felt righter than they ever had before, and I let out a contented sigh as I closed my eyes.

End of Book 1

End Notes

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